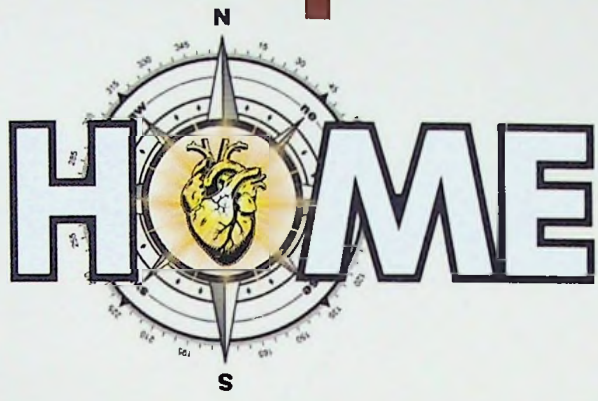
THE Compass



THE HEART OVER MIND & EGO (H.O.M.E.) METHOD

to Your Psycho-Spiritual Awakening, Alignment, & Holistic Well-Being

An Islamic Psychological Approach:
FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

MARWA ASSAR, PSYD

Foreword by Suhaib Webb

"In her book, "The Compass HOME," Dr. Marwa Assar skillfully weaves together a wealth of talents, drawing from her professional training as a psychologist, firsthand experiences in guiding and learning from faithful individuals seeking perspective in a challenging world, and her unwavering dedication to Islam. In this regard, she stands alongside the great Muslim scholars and physicians who have done the same before her. The text is comprehensive, occasionally vulnerable, and honest, offering sufficient theoretical knowledge to chart one's path while utilizing practical examples and exercises that dispel fears and uncertainties surrounding this topic." — **Suhaib Webb**, *Founder of SWISS Institute*

"In this book, Dr. Marwa Assar has beautifully weaved her life's journey into developing the H.O.M.E. Model of Islamic-based psychology and holistic psycho-spiritual wellness. Not only does she explore the truths of the inner world, but provides valuable insights into the transformative power of the self using The Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method. The book is a treat for lovers of Islamic psychology, therapists and spiritual leaders, and all others who want to learn from turning inward and navigating our path to find a balance between our mental and spiritual health."
— **Dr. Amber Haque**, *Islamic Psychology Program, Cambridge Muslim College*

"Dr. Marwa Assar's Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Psycho-Spiritual Model is a thought-provoking, heart-warming, and groundbreaking approach that offers a fresh and new perspective and conceptualization of the Qur'anic view of our inner world. Rooted in the teachings of Islam, the model brilliantly blends spirituality and human psychology in an accessible language. I highly recommend this book to mental health professionals, spiritual leaders, or anyone seeking self-understanding. It not only presents key foundations of Islamic Psychology, but also provides practical tools for application. Theory meets practice in this enlightening read."
— **Dr. Hassan Elwan**, *Yaqeen Institute*

"In The Compass HOME, Dr. Marwa Assar presents a tested methodology for aligning the heart with universal truths and values, allowing us to navigate life's storms with wisdom, alertness, and tranquility. The author has clearly done her research on the connectedness of the human being and the relationship between thought, emotion, motivation, and spirit. In this book, Dr. Marwa introduces the principles of her method and they are all centered on divine love in our lives–recognizing its existence and immersing ourselves in it despite our brokenness... Dr. Marwa's book is a welcome intervention in the field and is helpful to readers of diverse backgrounds seeking a richer explanation of the spiritual and theological bases of a healthy human psychology." — **Zaynab Ansari**, *Tayseer Seminary*

Written in a straightforward and accessible way for anyone from any background, it is a must-read and a most beautiful example of 'Islamic psychology for the people.' I am absolutely certain it is a tool God will use to help, heal, and guide many, inshaAllah." — **Dr. Carrie M. York**, *president of The Alkaram Institute*

"Dr. Marwa Assar is a master of her craft. She can interpret and explain the most complex matters of the mind and heart into an exciting and digestible form that most can understand and benefit from. This is a must-read book of the highest caliber in the field of Islamic psychology." — **Crescent Reviews**

Dr. Marwa Assar is a Doctor of Psychology (PsyD), psycho-spiritual teacher, and founder of The H.O.M.E. Institute, which is named after her Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method, and where she is dedicated to providing psycho-spiritual wellness education and empowerment through an Islamic psychological lens. Dr. Marwa has dedicated 15+ years to extensively exploring Islamic Psychology and has completed a doctoral research study on "An Islamic Psychological Approach to Psychotherapy," in 2017. In addition, she has over 10 years of experience providing therapy to diverse populations in various settings, which include drug rehab inpatient center, schools, private practice, and non-profit mental health organizations.

The H.O.M.E. Institute
Heart Over Mind & Ego

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International Acclaim for
The Compass HOME

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treated somewhat disjointedly in other forums. In this book, the reader has clear take-aways on the intersections between the *ruh*, *qalb*, *aql*, *nafs* and other inner realities of the human being. Adding to the book's strengths is the fact that the author also draws on the details of her own case studies and clinical work to demonstrate how the H.O.M.E. model (Heart Over Mind & Ego) has helped her clients and how her method can help you too. In my own search for self-help books in the wake of a tragedy in my life, I noticed a dearth of works aimed at a Muslim audience. Dr. Marwa's book is a welcome intervention in the field and is helpful to readers of diverse backgrounds seeking a richer explanation of the spiritual and theological bases of a healthy human psychology."

— **Zaynab Ansari**, Tayseer Seminary

"This book will move you with its authenticity. Dr. Marwa Assar writes from the deepest place of her heart where she shares so openly and with such beauty and honesty all that she has tasted and learned both personally and professionally in this field we today call Islamic psychology. Having known Dr. Marwa for nearly 10 years and witnessed the development of her work, I am overjoyed to see this book finally come to fruition. I have learned and benefited so much from what she has to teach, have been supported and comforted by her friendship, and it is a great honor and privilege to recommend this timely and very important book. Written in a straightforward and accessible way for anyone from any background, it is a must-read and a most beautiful example of 'Islamic psychology for the people.' I am absolutely certain it is a tool God will use to help, heal, and guide many, *inshaAllah*."

— **Dr. Carrie M. York,** president of The Alkaram Institute

"Dr. Marwa Assar has beautifully illuminated the profound realm of Islamic psychology in this book. With a refreshing and spiritual perspective, the author skillfully guides us towards understanding the intricate interplay between the heart, mind, and ego within the context of Islamic teachings. Through captivating insights and deep wisdom, she emphasizes on the significance of nurturing the heart's purity and spiritual connection, allowing readers to transcend the limitations of the ego-driven world. This captivating journey through the realms of faith and psychology reminds us that true self-discovery and fulfillment stem from cultivating a harmonious balance between the heart's intuitive wisdom and the mind's rational understanding. A must-read for those seeking transformative insights into the interplay of spirituality and psychology."

— **Shaykh Didmar Faja**, United Islamic Center of Arizona

"A remarkable resource that offers a holistic perspective full of wisdom and insights grounded in the principles of Islamic psychology. Read this book *now* and then share it with your family and friends. Highly recommended!"

— **Flamur Vehapi**, author of *Ertugrul Ghazi: A Very Short Biography*

"In this exploration of religious and secular thought, it becomes apparent that prevailing secular views tend to separate religion from other sciences, while Islam perceives the universe as governed by God's administration, necessitating surrender to His will for understanding. Islamic literature is rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah, but modern thinking often disregards Islamic solutions to problems. Dr. Marwa Assar's book, *The Compass HOME*, introduces an Islamic perspective that unites the heart and brain, offering holistic insight into human complexities and solutions to psychological challenges. By aligning with the Creator's program, healing and self-discovery are attainable. Dr. Assar's book emphasizes God's central role, and its wisdom can benefit those seeking solutions to their psychological concerns."

— **Dr. Ali Arslan**, professor, Sakarya University

"Dr. Marwa Assar's *The Compass HOME* is an extremely well-conceived approach for gaining greater mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being through years of study, reflection and more importantly clinical application of her unique but effective methods. *The Compass HOME* is extremely useful, relevant, and timely – and long overdue in confidently providing a much-needed spiritual aspect to our modern psychological practices. It does so in a way that is relatable, easy to understand and grasp, and a joy to read. After all, it takes us on a spiritual journey, both Dr. Assar's and our own. But home and where you start are the same place; we're just made richer by the experience. Thank you, Dr. Assar, for allowing us to go with you on the ride."

— **Brandon Mayfield**, author of *Atheism Versus Belief*

The Compass

HOME

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— Heart Over Mind & Ego —

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In the Name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful
& Peace and Blessings Be Upon His Beloved (ﷺ)

Heal **Your Heart**

Live **From Your Soul**

Feel **Like Home**

When our mind is the lead,
we walk towards God
only as far as we can comprehend Him
When our ego (*nafs*) is the lead,
we walk towards God
only when it makes us feel good
When our heart is the lead,
we walk towards God in all our conditions[1]

1 Poem by the author.

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Shukr

My Deepest Gratitude & Appreciation

This book wouldn't have been possible without, first and foremost, my *Rabb* (ﷻ), Lord of the Worlds, *Al-Awalu Wa Al-Akhiru* (the Beginning and the End). Any benefit found in this book is due to Him, His guidance, His truths, and only because of what He has chosen to unveil for me to know and experience. I thank Him for the love and mercy He has enveloped me with throughout my life. I thank Him for His guidance and the immense blessing of Islam. I thank Him for our beloved Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), the kindest gift and mercy to mankind, who conveyed the most important truths we will ever need in our lifetime, and whose heart is filled with great love and mercy for us though he has not seen us and we have not seen him. I ask God to send many peace and blessings upon our beloved (ﷺ), and his family and companions (رضي الله عنهم). I thank God for the tests and challenges He custom tailored for me on my path. Without them, I would not have learned the truths I needed to do the work I love today or to write this book. I thank Him for His giving and for His withholding, for what He blessed me with and what He took away, for my joys in life and for my sorrows, for my laughter and for my tears, for the doors He has opened and for the doors He has closed, for the knowledge He gave me and for what I do not know, for the questions He answered and the questions that remain unanswered, for my hopes and for my fears, for the blessings I prayed for and for the blessings I never thought to ask for, for the prayers He answered swiftly and for the prayers I still repeat. I thank Him for all my experiences, in all their opposite forms, for God teaches us through the turning of our hearts from one truth to another. I appreciate them all as I appreciate the night and day, the sunset and sunrise, the winter and the spring, the cloudy days and the sunny days. Through all our experiences, He speaks to our hearts and teaches us the greatest treasures. He is forever my Greatest Teacher, and I am forever His student.

I am also filled with the greatest gratitude and appreciation for all the beautiful souls He put on my path that have played a role in who I am today and the work I present to you in this book. I am deeply grateful to my beautiful mother for her love, guidance, for holding the most patient and loving space for me to process so many of my reflections over the years, and for being a haven for me in the storms of life. I thank her for her beautiful heart, her ability to always greet me with the biggest smile, even through her hardest times, and

for her unwavering love and selfless dedication to our family. It is her love and mercy that truly helped my heart understand just how great God's love and mercy must be. May God bless her always and grant her great joy and success in this world and the next. I am deeply appreciative of her, my entire family, and my wonderful friends for their beautiful encouragement and support.

My heart is also filled with great gratitude for my beloved teacher Ustadh Fikry Fahmy (or, as most of us call him, "Amu Fikry") who I met at the age of 17, and was able learn Islam from and attend study circles with for about the 10 years that followed. He was truly a gift to me on my path. He was not only a great teacher to me throughout my journey, but he also became like a father to me and a great friend and mentor. He was one of the first people I told that I wanted to change my undergraduate major to psychology and explore psychology through an Islamic lens. In response to that, he gave me his full support and encouragement, and told me that this work was missing and very much needed in our communities but also how much he thought I was a great fit for it. He saw strengths within me that I did not see in myself and He gave me the encouragement, guidance, and support I needed to do this work today. I thank him for his unwavering support and concern for me as a person and my success in this world and the next. May God bless him always and grant him joy in this world and the next.

I want to also show my appreciation to all of my fellow explorers and colleagues in the modern Islamic psychology field and the Muslim mental health field who are actively working to serve the holistic well-being of Muslims around the globe. May God bless all of their efforts. I am also deeply thankful for the encouragement and support of colleagues and friends, such as Dr. Carrie York and Dr. Raymond Brock-Murray, as well as the encouragement and support of teachers who I have learned from along the way, such as Sheikh Didmar Faja and Shaykh Mohammad Ninowy. A special thanks is owed to Dr. Hassan Elwan, who was one of the first people that I shared the H.O.M.E. Method with in 2014, who took the time to give me feedback and became a great mentor to me on my own spiritual path, as well as a fellow colleague in the work of exploring psychological wellness through an Islamic lens. I thank him for his mentorship, encouragement, knowledge, and support of my work. Finally, I want to thank Flamur Vehapi for being a wonderful book advisor to me throughout this process, Stella Williams and Erzen Pashaj who each played an important role in this book's journey to publication, as well as Ustadha Zaynab Ansari, Shaykh Suhaib Webb, Dr. Ali Arslan, Dr. Amber Haque, and Brandon Mayfield, for their great support of this book. I pray that God rewards everyone I mention here abundantly, in this world and the next.

Foreword

All praise is to Allah (ﷻ), and peace and blessings be upon His Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and those who follow him. In the Qur'an, Allah (ﷻ) sent the Prophet (ﷺ) as a guide to the mind, the limbs, and the heart, stating, "We sent a messenger to you, reciting our verses, purifying you, and instructing you in wisdom" (Qur'an, Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:151).[2]

Moreover, the Prophet (ﷺ) emphasized the significance of the heart, declaring, "In the body, there is a morsel. If it is corrupt, the body is corrupt; if it is sound, the entire body is sound. Undoubtedly, it is the heart."[3] Some of the Prophet's (ﷺ) companions reflected on this hadith, likening the body to an army, the mind to a general, and the heart to a king, guiding the rest of the faculties in alignment with its commands.

Numerous other texts underscore the centrality of the heart, associating it with sight and understanding. Allah (ﷻ) says, "It is not the eyes that are blind, but the hearts in chests that cannot see," and "They have hearts that don't understand" (Qur'an, Surah Al-Hajj, 22:46).[4] While some may misunderstand these verses, the Qur'an delves deeper, focusing on a higher level of perception and comprehension that enables one to see beyond the surface of life and grasp what truly matters: worship, the hereafter, and the regulation of desires. This alignment is difficult, as it requires bringing the body into harmony with the soul. Hence, the text before you is significant, as it takes you on a journey, not to a far-off land, but to yourself, your home, and your heart.

In her book, "The Compass HOME," Dr. Marwa Assar skillfully weaves together a wealth of talents, drawing from her professional training as a psychologist, firsthand experiences in guiding and learning from faithful individuals seeking perspective in a challenging world, and her unwavering dedication to Islam. In this regard, she stands alongside the great Muslim scholars and physicians who have done the same before her. The text is comprehensive, occasionally vulnerable, and honest, offering sufficient theoretical knowledge

2 The full verse says, "Thus, We have sent among you a Messenger of your own, reciting to you Our verses and purifying you, and teaching you the Book and Wisdom, and teaching you what you did not know."

3 *Hadith* in Sahīh al-Bukhārī, 52.

4 The full verse says, "Do they not travel through the land, and have they hearts wherewith to understand and ears wherewith to hear? Verily, it is not the eyes that grow blind, but it is the hearts which are in the breasts that grow blind."

to chart one's path while utilizing practical examples and exercises that dispel fears and uncertainties surrounding this topic. This is extremely important in an age of Islamophobia that extracts a tremendous toll on Muslims, creating an endemic trauma within our community. As a wounded *ummah* in severe pain, healing and finding our way back to what has never failed us are crucial. Dr. Marwa deserves congratulations for merging multiple disciplines while remaining rooted and true to Islam.

I encourage those interested in this subject to seize the opportunity and benefit from this important work and, most importantly, to embark on the journey home. As the Prophet (ﷺ) said, "A believer is like a horse; it may wander off for a day but will inevitably return to its master."[5]

— **Suhaib Webb**, founder of SWISS Institute

5 *Sunan Ibn Majah*, 43.

PREFACE

The Journey To Navigating Islamic Psychology

The heart is the most important and sacred part within us that we can bring into any space, to any class, and to any book. It is the part within us that needs to be seen and nourished above all else, if we are to be powerfully and truthfully transformed by what we learn. So I want to begin by first thanking you for **bringing your heart** to this book and I pray that the heart you bring becomes more nourished, more whole, more free, and more at peace as you navigate these pages within. In this book, I share with you my Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method to psychological and spiritual (psycho-spiritual) wellness, an approach I developed in 2014, through an Islamic psychological lens, that is designed to awaken you to the spiritual, mental, and emotional power of **giving your heart back its rightful position of leader within your being.**

With the increased rise of psychological challenges as well as spiritual challenges, and with the highly stimulating, ego-promoting world we live in, there is a need – more than ever – for heart-centered, psycho-spiritual and self-help knowledge that can speak to the holistic and existential experience of the human being. This is what I believe an Islamic psychological perspective can offer. But despite Islam being the fastest growing religion in the world and observed by millions of people in the West, the psychology and self-help resources available that integrate Islam and speak to Muslims are minimal. This is greatly due to Islamophobia and the negative narrative of Muslims and Islam that is often portrayed by the media. In fact, it was through my doctoral research on Islamic Psychology that I even discovered how Islamophobia impacts non-Muslim therapists working with Muslim clients, due to their negative and skewed perceptions of Islam. We cannot underestimate the power of the media in impacting the psychology of the masses and how they perceive an entire group of people and their faith. I recall a very specific moment in which I felt the impact of Islamophobia when I went to the religion section in a Barnes & Noble store one day, only to find that amongst all the religious books, it was the Qur'ans that were ripped up and destroyed. It was heartbreaking. But incidents like this were happening more and more in a post-9/11 world, where Islam and Muslims became more targeted and alienated. And this alienation most definitely impacted the presence of Islamic content in the mainstream psychology and self-help world.

But the absence of an Islamic presence in the self-help and psychology fields does not just impact Muslims. It also deprives the world from accessing the beautiful psychological and spiritual treasures within Islamic teachings that speak to the nature of the human being, our holistic needs, and our spiritual, mental, and emotional wellness. This is a truth I highlighted when completing my doctoral dissertation, "An Islamic Psychological Approach to Psychotherapy," in 2017.

This relationship between Islam and psychology is what I have been passionate about since the age of 18. Even before I decided to start formally studying psychology, I found my heart gravitating towards this integration between religion, spirituality, and our psychology. I long to experience meaning and connection through everything I do, and I truly believe that is what God teaches us to do. Islam is centered around belief in divine unity, or the oneness of God. This is known in Arabic as *tawheed*, and it is the belief that everything is connected to God and His Truths, for He is the Creator of everything that exists. Embodying and living with *tawheed* is seeing all our experiences through God and His plan for us. *Tawheed* is seeing that all true and beneficial knowledge comes from God, who has named Himself the Truth (*Al-Haqq*).

This is why historically, Muslims do not have a conflict between the sciences and faith, because it all points to God. We see the evidence of this in Islamic history, in which Muslim scholars through the ages extensively studied and contributed to all fields of science, including Medicine, Anatomy, Astronomy, Psychology, and many more. This can be particularly witnessed during the Golden Age of Islam between the 8th and 15th centuries, a significant period in history that contributed to the Renaissance period in Europe. It was a time when people from all over the world, including Christians and Jews, would go study and benefit from the Islamic world and their scholars.

It was at this time, during the height of Islamic civilization, when Islamic scholars were exploring various challenges and approaches in psychiatry, psychology, and even psychotherapy. But unfortunately, Muslim contributions to the sciences of the world, including psychology, are not something that is taught in Western classrooms. In my ten years of studying psychology – through my bachelors, masters, and doctoral programs in the United States, and learning about early contributions of Western psychologists – I never once was taught about even *earlier* Islamic contributions to psychology that impacted the West's understanding of psychology itself. For example, it was in the Dark Ages of Europe that mental health challenges were interpreted as demonic, witchlike, or evil. And it was Muslim scholars and philosophers like Al-Razi (ﷺ), Al-Kindi (ﷺ), and Ibn Sina (ﷺ) who introduced a more holistic, healthier, and more positive view of psychology to the European Christian

world. In fact, it was Al-Razi and Ibn Sina who began helping the Christian world remove this idea that people who struggle with mental health illnesses are demons or witches. Ibn Sina (who was given the Westernized name of Avicenna) also contributed a work called "The Book of Healing" in the 11th century, which addressed the relationship between psychology and health. And it was Islamic scholars such as Al-Ghazali (ﷺ) in the 11th century, and Ibn Al-Qayyim (ﷺ) in the 14th century, who created works that integrated key psychological teachings from an Islamic perspective. It was great scholars such as these and many others who advanced Europe into the Renaissance period.

I am forever indebted to these Muslim giants who contributed to the Islamic psychology world long before me, and the understanding of psychology through a holistic, spiritual lens. They were a great inspiration for me on my path to doing the work I do today to approach psychological and spiritual wellness through an Islamic psychological lens. They taught me to approach knowledge and learning with an open and curious heart, but while remaining grounded in my faith. They taught me that knowledge is power, and only strengthens our ability to understand God, ourselves, and the world we are navigating.

And while the world is full of beneficial knowledge, my heart gravitated particularly to the knowledge of psychology, and the understanding of the human being, how we think, feel, and behave. Whenever I was studying Islam, whether it be the Qur'an, the life story (the *seerah*) of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), or reading the works of early Islamic scholars, my heart was always drawn to how God spoke to our psychological experience. That is where the eye of my heart went. I was fascinated with understanding our inner design; not just what makes up our physical facets, but more so understanding what makes up our psychological and spiritual facets and experiences. My heart would come to life when I would read a verse that showed me how God spoke to our various tests and emotional experiences in this world. I would be in awe of how the Prophet (ﷺ) held a space for the hearts, thoughts, emotions, and pain of others. I was inspired by how the companions of the Prophet (ﷺ) owned who they were and showed me that we all do not have to be the same, that each of our personalities are unique gifts from God.

However, early on in my journey, it was rare to hear an Islamic scholar, speaker, or community member speak to our mental and emotional wellness. Mental health was very much a taboo subject in the Muslim community at the time. And on a personal level, I was a young adult trying to make sense of who I was and my own struggles, and craving the Islamic and spiritual knowledge that would guide me on how to connect to myself and have a healthy and grounded relationship with myself that was rooted in my relationship with God.

I found myself very confused and disconnected from myself. I had questions about knowing myself, loving myself, and how to bridge this relationship with myself *with* my relationship with God. But every time I looked for answers that would help me better understand myself in a way that connected me to God, I could not find what I was seeking. It was only when I went directly to God's words (the Qur'an) and continued learning the way of life He prescribed for me (*Islam*), that I started gathering the pieces I needed to understand myself, my thoughts, and my emotions in a way that connected me to Him. I quickly began to see how God never negated our psychology, individuality, imperfections, and our emotional experiences. In fact, it became obvious to me that God teaches us how to view ourselves holistically, and how to see the value and interconnectedness of all the facets within us and all the areas of our lives.

I started to see how God validates us in ways that people don't. And I started to wonder why the way Islam was taught to our communities was sometimes dismissive of addressing these important facets within us that God created to be taken care of and not ignored. At the same time, I also saw how our psychological experience and our relationship with ourselves can interact with our spiritual experience. I saw the importance of our psychology and the role it played on our spiritual path and the way we understood God and walked towards Him. I realized that, without understanding our psychology, we can easily fall into a habit of spiritual bypassing, where we use Islamic and spiritual teachings to mask or hide our real, imperfect, raw, human, mental and emotional experiences.

On the other end, I was also immersing myself in the Western self-help and psychology world, but struggled to find resources that did integrate Islam and speak to my beliefs in God. For many years, I have immersed myself in hundreds of self-help and psychology books that covered various topics, but I always struggled to find a book that incorporated my faith, especially early on in my journey. As a practicing Muslim, especially during my late teens and early 20s, I longed for the knowledge that can empower me mentally and emotionally, but also does not negate my relationship with God and the religious beliefs that guide my core values and how I approach and live my life. Throughout the years, I would find great joy in visiting bookstores wherever I lived or traveled, in search of beautiful books that can empower me holistically. And although I am grateful for all the books that enriched my life and contributed to my growth over the years, I was always sad to see the bookshelves void of self-help books that speak to my faith and show the world what Islam has to offer to our psycho-spiritual wellness. While I came across many psychologically grounded self-help books rooted in different religions like Buddhism and Christianity or other spiritual philosophies, I never came across a

book in Barnes & Noble, an airport bookstore, or even a small local bookstore, that carried a self-help or psychological book that spoke to our spiritual, mental, and emotional wellness through an Islamic lens. If I did find books in the self-help world that integrated Islam, they were often solely theological or spiritual books that rarely had a sound grounding in psychology or clinical training. They were often written by authors who didn't have extensive or graduate studies in psychology and actual clinical and counseling experience working with clients, and could do more harm than good in addressing the mental and emotional experience and struggles of Muslims. This is why discovering the great works of Dr. Malik Badri and Dr. Mostafa Al-Badawi brought so much joy to my heart, because they were books that integrated Islam, but also were rooted in sound psychological knowledge.

Thankfully, today, we have an emerging and growing presence of modern Islamic psychological books in the West, written by fellow explorers in the Islamic psychology field, that are in fact rooted in sound psychological education and training. However, it is still a relatively new field, and many of the books written so far, often speak in solely theoretical and academic terms, which is important and necessary, but do not necessarily address the great gap and need in the *self-help world* for books that incorporate both theory and practice and speak to the hearts of those looking for an accessible journey of transformation. There is a great and continuous need for the translation of Islamic psychology knowledge from Islamic and academic texts into self-help books that can be easily understood and are accompanied by a practical guide for the reader on how to apply that knowledge into their life. My deepest goal is, through this book, *The Compass HOME*, to offer you just that: *a psycho-spiritual self-help book on Islamic psychology, from theory to practice.*

This book is essentially a product of my efforts to take my 15+ years of actively exploring Islam and Psychology, as well as my research and academic work, teaching experience, and clinical and counseling experience, and present that knowledge through both theory and application, so that it becomes more accessible and beneficial to many people who are seeking to grow spiritually, mentally, and emotionally. Therefore, this book is split into two parts: **Part 1 on theory and foundations, and Part 2 which focuses on practice.**

My motivation for writing this book is deeply rooted in the fact that the easily accessible self-help books existing today in the West – that are backed up by clinical experience and do speak to *both* our psychology and spirituality – are often void of any belief in God, taught from a perspective of another faith other than Islam, or are rooted in new-age spirituality that might not always be in line with Islamic teachings. This was the very challenge I faced when searching for self-help books early on in my own personal journey. Looking back at my life,

I know that all of these challenges were a blessing in disguise, for this gap in the self-help and psychology world propelled me to spend significant time filtering what I was learning through an Islamic framework. I deeply enjoyed immersing myself in self-help, personal development, and psychology books, and exploring how the teachings I was absorbing related back to Islam, to what God taught me in the Qur'an and through the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). From the opposite end, I would do the same with Islamic texts. I would read the Qur'an, books on the *seerah* (the life) of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), or the works of early Islamic scholars, such as Imam Al-Ghazali, and would find myself reflecting on how the knowledge I was acquiring speaks to our psychological wellness and what I was learning in Western self-help and psychology books, as well as through my own academic work. I spent countless moments and hours of my life for the last 15 years, deeply reflecting upon the bridge between Islamic teachings and our psychological, spiritual, and holistic well-being.

For a long time, I was doing this solely due to the love I had for both Islam and psychology, but most importantly for my own mind, heart, and growth, because *I* benefited from it. This wasn't an intentional or conscious plan at the very start of my journey. It was something I found myself naturally doing. If I was studying Islam, I found myself reflecting deeply on how God speaks to our psychological and spiritual experiences. If I was studying the Western self-help or psychology world, I found myself reflecting deeply on how aspects of what I was learning speak to my spiritual experience, my faith, and navigating my relationship with God. And I would do this out of joy and for my own growth above all else. It wasn't for a career or because I had decided I would explore Islamic psychology. At that time, I was a biology major, on the pre-med track, and I hadn't even heard anyone talk about Islamic psychology. I was just following my heart. I felt this work was calling me, and it was enough that I loved it and benefited from it. But then I realized that what I needed was also needed by many others. And as I encountered and held space for the varying spiritual and emotional struggles of others within my close circles, school, and community, I started to notice that my heart would come alive when I helped someone make sense of their inner chaos or when I was able to serve as a haven for them during their storms of life. I felt more alive holding space for the mental, emotional, and spiritual struggles of others than I ever did in a biology or chemistry class or lab. I quickly became sharply attuned to how important it is for me to begin doing this work to not only answer the calling of my heart but most importantly to benefit the hearts of others. Because if God placed love in my heart for this work, then it means I have to *use* it to serve His creation and world. And it *was* a very strong love, one I couldn't ignore, or go against, despite receiving criticisms from people who questioned how in the world I was going to merge two worlds like Islam and psychology,

who couldn't believe I was leaving behind the goal of going to medical school, and who viewed career success in a very narrow way, that did not include the study of psychology. But thankfully, God also placed people in my life that were very supportive and believed in the vision and goal I had to empower others psychologically and spiritually through an Islamic lens. But above all, God's support was the strongest. It was the kind of support that was very much alive and felt in my heart, an inner experience that no words can truly do justice to. This is why I spent a decade studying psychology and trained to be a psychologist, why I did my doctoral research on Islamic Psychology, and why I eventually created The H.O.M.E. Institute and began teaching various psycho-spiritual topics and courses through my Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method.

> "*Everyone has been made for some particular work, and the desire for that work has been put in every heart. Let yourself be silently drawn by the stronger pull of what you really love.*"[6] — Rumi

After I graduated from my doctoral program in 2017, and while I was working as a therapist, I started creating and teaching psycho-spiritual education (i.e., courses and programs) through an Islamic psychological lens and rooted in my Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method, to begin helping others align their inner world while learning the knowledge that can empower their psychological and spiritual wellness. I wanted every heart that took my courses to feel like I am not only speaking to their mental health but also their spiritual and holistic well-being as well. And as I created courses that were rooted in the H.O.M.E. Method's teaching of leading from the heart, I also designed my courses and taught them in a way that was heart-centered and prioritized the hearts of students taking the courses.

My motivation for creating and teaching Islamic psycho-spiritual education was greatly rooted in the fact that I didn't want my work to stay at an academic level where it might not always translate to real life application for those outside of the professional psychology or academic world. I loved researching Islam and psychology and loved the academia world, but the intention I set in the beginning to serve others never changed. The hearts of people always mattered the most to me. It was not enough for me to study psychology for 10 years, to have a doctoral degree in my hand, or to complete a research study on Islam and psychology, if the knowledge I gained was not going to be accessible. All of these things are not the *end* for me. They were not my destination. They are the means to serving those who need the accessible and practical knowledge and tools that will empower them spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and holistically.

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6 Marcus, P. (2021).

They are a means to creating havens for the hearts of others in this world, just as a lighthouse provides travelers a haven from the unrelenting waves of the ocean. I have always been in awe of the prophetic traits that a lighthouse embodies, for I believe Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) was a lighthouse. He was a haven for the hearts around him. He was a light amongst the darkness. He always provided hope when those around him thought there was no end in sight. He was always a place of refuge. And it is my love for creating havens on this earth for the hearts of others that inspires my work in Islamic psychology, my work as a therapist, and why I created The H.O.M.E. Institute and started teaching psycho-spiritual wellness through an Islamic psychological lens. And it is my deepest prayer that the work at The H.O.M.E. Institute, the H.O.M.E. Method itself, and this book, serve as a haven for the hearts of others.

Alhamdulilah, since I have graduated from my doctoral program in 2017, I have developed and extensively taught courses and topics through an Islamic psychological lens, such as "Sacred Self-Love," "Sacred Authenticity," "Conquering Codependency," "Tackling Psychological Barriers to Spiritual Growth," "Wholehearted Living & Cultivating Heartfulness," "The Psychology of Worship," and "Anxiety & Piety." My greatest work at The H.O.M.E. Institute has been The God & Me Program, a psycho-spiritual educational transformation program that guides students to transform their relationship with God and with themselves. It is through The God & Me Program and much of my work at The H.O.M.E. Institute that I was able to share what I learned through my years of exploring the relationship between ourselves and God, and our spiritual, mental, and emotional wellness through an Islamic psychological lens. And I would not have been able to do this work if God did not first teach it to me so deeply on a personal level.

I am forever grateful to Him for His guidance and for putting the love of this work in my heart. It is with *this* great love and gratitude that I have written this book on the H.O.M.E. Method, reflecting the greatest lessons that navigating psycho-spiritual wellness and Islamic psychology has taught me, both personally and professionally, over the last 15+ years.

Through this book, with God's help and guidance, I will share with you the knowledge and tools that I believe wholeheartedly can help you begin taking practical steps towards better navigating your inner world. This book is centered around reconnecting you to the power of your heart. Every page in this book is written with your heart's awakening at the very center of my own heart's focus, as I take you on an intentionally designed psychological and spiritual (psycho-spiritual) journey to navigating your inner world in a way that prioritizes the leadership and nourishment of your heart and the corresponding alignment of your mind, ego, and thoughts and emotions. Through writing

that speaks to both your psychology and spirituality, I hope to play a role in transforming how you view your holistic health and well-being, who you are at your core, the relationship you have with yourself, the relationship you have with God, the way you interact with others, and the way you react to your blessings, challenges, and experiences in life. And to further bring that writing home to your heart, throughout these chapters I have included poetry I have written over the years as I was reflecting on many of the concepts I share with you in this book.

I have also incorporated key truths I have discovered through my clinical and counseling experience working with clients over the past decade. I have been fortunate to have a wide range of experience working with diverse populations, of all ages, Muslim clients and non-Muslim clients, and with extensive and diverse mental, emotional, spiritual, and social struggles. Challenges I have worked with my clients to face and work through include drug abuse and addiction, various mental health disorders from anxiety to Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), depression, and borderline personality disorder. I also have extensive experience helping others navigate issues such as codependency, toxic relationships, narcissistic abuse, family issues, abandonment wounds, unhealthy attachment styles, low self-worth and self-love, anger issues, and many more. It was these experiences of facing the diverse mental, emotional, and spiritual challenges of my clients that allowed me to see and truly understand the immense power that an Islamic psychological approach to our holistic well-being can have and the great necessity for us to lead from the heart.

As you turn each page of this book, you will (God willing) gain greater insight into the power God placed within you to navigate your path in this world more beautifully, more peacefully, and with a greater sense of sacred self-love, wholeness and a grounding in truth and authenticity. Ultimately, my intention for writing this book is to help you realize the immeasurable power of your inner world and the peace, alignment, awakening, freedom, and joy you can experience when you navigate and align this inner world with how God designed it and with the truths He sent to you as guidance.

I write for every Muslim that is seeking the spiritual and psychological knowledge and tools that are practical and will produce real transformation in their lives, but that are also very much rooted in their faith, and in empowering their Islamic core beliefs and relationship with God. But while this book is written primarily for the Muslim community, I want to make it clear that I am also writing for any heart that has been searching for truth and longing for the guidance, knowledge, and tools that empower their mental and emotional wellness in a holistic and God-centered way that does not negate who they are as spiritual beings. And so, whether this book is in the hands of a Muslim,

Christian, Jew, agnostic, a spiritual person who does not identify with any religion, or even a curious atheist, I welcome your heart, and pray that this book serves to bring comfort to your heart and to be a means to aligning you once again with your *fitrah*, the truth of who you are and the truth you came into this world with.

This book is designed to speak to the heart of those who are in a place in their life where they feel weighed down by the mental and emotional heaviness of their tests. I want to speak to the overburdened mind that can't let you get a good night's sleep, and help you be present, feel joy, or allow your heart to feel nourished by what God has put right in front of you in the here and now. I want to speak to every soul that has given the power of feeling worthy, whole, enough and nourished to people, circumstances, and things outside of them that are not within their control. I am speaking to the person who feels disconnected from themselves, their needs, and their potential. I am speaking to those who long for a more holistic view of their mental and emotional challenges, whether it be anxiety, the need to always be in control, fears that keep you stuck, intrusive thoughts, low self-esteem, unhealthy attachments, the struggle to trust yourself, excessive self-criticalness, or the inability to express love and compassion to yourself. I am also speaking to those who want the guidance to begin transforming the behaviors that threaten the quality of their lives and the fulfillment, nourishment, and growth they can experience in life. I am speaking to those who want to *feel like home.*

INTRODUCTION

Islamic Psychology: From Theory to Practice

Today, many people are struggling – not only spiritually, but also mentally and emotionally – and there is a need, more than ever, for a return to wholeness. The pains of the world are speaking to a great need for inner awakening, alignment, and transformation that serves our *whole* being, that honors both our psychological and spiritual needs, and does not negate our human experience and most importantly, our existential purpose. And this is precisely why Islamic psychology is a field of great importance in our time. It is a field that beautifully highlights how two seemingly separate realms like Islam and psychology are not separate at all; that within the Qur'an and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), psychology and the emphasis on holistic well-being, is very well present and alive.

Islamic psychology offers the world a truly whole, interconnected, and holistic perspective of who we are and how to navigate our spiritual, mental, and emotional well-being in all realms. But while Islamic psychology is great to understand theoretically and through research, and this was a significant part of my journey to doing this work, it is crucial that we take that knowledge beyond the theory and into real-life application. And this is what the Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method is designed to offer: an Islamic psychological approach that takes you from theory to practice, so that you may see the fruits of the knowledge you gain in your day-to-day life. Because for me, exploring Islamic psychology has always been about one purpose: how it can beautify, elevate, and align us internally so that, in turn, our mind, heart, emotions, behaviors, relationships, and the health of other areas of life become beautified, elevated, and aligned as well. But oftentimes, especially in today's world, we forget what knowledge at its core is there to offer us, which is inner and outward transformation, beautification, and elevation. Unfortunately, too many times, we get stuck in our minds, in the theory and intellectualness of what we learn, that we forget to assess whether that knowledge is actually bearing fruits in our heart, actions, and life.

At the end of the day, we all crave to feel aligned internally. We long to feel grounded, secure, enough, and whole. We want to have nourishing relationships and live days of purpose. We want our hearts awakened to the beauty and blessings of our life, and not just going through the motions, on cruise control. We all want the information we gain to become true knowledge in our heart

and the fuel of great actions and habits. We all want to *not* feel fragmented, like we are scattered with pieces of ourselves spread out in different areas of our life. Instead, we want to be whole as we interact with *all* the pieces of our life. We want to walk this earth with an inner sense of self that is authentic, truthful, aligned, and not in conflict with what we present outwardly to the world. We all want inner peace, for this heart within us to be the greatest and most beautiful home we live in as we journey through this world. And this is the very core purpose of the Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method, to help you find your way to cultivating the most beautiful home within.

This *H.O.M.E.* Approach to psycho-spiritual wellness is a methodology I conceptualized during my doctoral studies, as I was working on my research in Islamic psychology. It is an approach that is based upon the Islamic psychological principle that the heart has a greater intelligence than any other facet within us. This is a truth that spoke to me while exploring our psychology and our inner world through the Qur'an and *sunnah*, and from seeing its relationship to my studies of Western psychology and our modern-day mental and emotional struggles. It is through exploring Islam and psychology that I have learned the psycho-spiritual (psychological and spiritual) power of giving back the heart its rightful position of leader within our being, and establishing it as the center of our inner world. It is my belief that learning how to treat our hearts as the leader of our being, is what will help us *heal our hearts, live from our souls,* and *feel an internal sense of home* throughout our journey in this world.

By "*psycho-spiritual,*" I am referring to the integration of both psychology and spirituality, which means that I am bridging teachings from both the psychology world and Islamic spiritual world together to provide you a more holistic view of who you are, as well as the knowledge and tools that can empower you mentally, emotionally, and also spiritually. By "*Islamic psychological approach,*" I am referring to the merging of psychology and Islam, and an approach that explores psychology through the traditional teachings of the Qur'an and *sunnah*, the way of life of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). Through sharing this method, I aim to help you experience greater spiritual, mental, and emotional alignment: the kind of inner alignment that allows you to feel awakened to your purpose, life, and potential, and be more at peace with yourself, with God, with others, as you navigate this imperfect and fleeting human experience we are all journeying through.

Through both theory and practice, the H.O.M.E. Method will give you an Islamic psychological view into navigating this sacred and powerful inner world within you, or what I define as your *psycho-spiritual system*, for this is where I truly believe real transformation begins, by understanding the world within. In the H.O.M.E. Psycho-Spiritual Model that I developed to teach the H.O.M.E.

Method, I created the term "*psycho-spiritual system*" to refer to the facets or tools within you that contribute to your spiritual and psychological abilities and experiences, such as the ability to think, to feel sadness or happiness, to interpret your experiences, to connect to your Creator, and to experience a connection with yourself, others, and God. These abilities come from the inner tools and functions that comprise your *psycho-spiritual system*, such as your mind, your heart, your cognition, and emotions. Through my journey navigating Islam and psychology, I learned the great harms of not understanding this sacred world within and how important it is to navigate its facets in a way that serves our holistic well-being.

But my journey to developing the H.O.M.E. Method was first and foremost a personal one, filled with experiences, self-explorations, pain and tests in life that taught me the undeniable role of God in my life, the power of my own heart, and the fascinating way in which God speaks to our psychology and the holistic nature of our human experience. From a young age, I was always curious about the world within that makes up who we are, our differences, and how we interact with each other. This curiosity was something that came very naturally to me. People to me have always been like a great, beautiful, complex work of art, with our personalities, upbringing, cultural backgrounds, struggles, and imperfections, all painting the beauty we exude into the world. We each are a unique work of art with God being the greatest of Artists, or as He has named Himself in the Qur'an, "*Al-Musawir*," which means the Greatest Sculptor, Fashioner, and the One who forms everything beautifully.

While God's great art can be witnessed through His creation in the world outside of us, like the mountains, the oceans, the sun, the moon, and the varying, breathtaking landscapes that cover the earth, I believe amongst his magnificent works of art is us humans. God's great artistic power can be witnessed by looking at the beautiful complexity and holistic design of the human being. And just like any great work of art, we are designed so intricately, so beautifully, with the best of colors, on the best of canvases, and above all, we were fashioned with great care and love from the Artist Himself.

As God tells us in the Qur'an, "*Indeed, We created humans in the best form*" (95:4). This verse can easily be witnessed and felt by our hearts when we see how perfectly He created our physical bodies, from the creation and perfect placement of each of our organs to the smallest cell that serves a crucial function in maintaining our health and survival. Through fashioning our diverse exteriors and looks to the distinguishable fingerprint on each of our index fingers, God shows us His greatness through our very design.

> "*Yes indeed, We are able to put together in perfect order the very tips of his (man's) fingers.*" (Qur'an, 75:4)

To the tips of our fingers, God's art is present. And He has the immeasurable and infinite power to mold each work of art so uniquely and diversely. God's art can never be replicated. This is why no two people are exactly alike. Even identical twins can be distinguished by subtle differences and through their unique fingertips. No two people can have the same fingerprint, and through this truth, God is teaching us that we *each* have the power to leave our own unique imprint in the world. And that is what makes us such a beautiful work of art: the power God gave us to impact others through our own beauty. Because that is what great art does. Its beauty leaves a unique imprint and impact on the hearts it interacts with. And we each have the ability to do the same when we recognize the uniqueness and beauty of our own design.

But what influences our impact and unique imprint in the world is not just the perfection of our physical forms. We do not leave an impact just because God gave us a beautiful face or created us with a perfect anatomy and a unique fingerprint. It is not our physical bodies that impact the beauty we share with our world. Our fingerprints are physical signs of our unique potential, but not what puts that potential into motion. What moves our potential comes from a greater work of art, found beyond the exterior of our physical bodies, and that is our inner world.

This is the very world that has always fascinated me. For when God says He has created us in the best of forms, He is not referring to just our physical bodies and the physical facets that make up who we are. God also created our psychological and spiritual facets in the best of forms, and *these* are the facets that have the greatest influence on the unique impression we leave everywhere we go. And this is what my heart was always drawn to. I was drawn to understanding this inner, unseen world that contributes to the outer world we *do* see. I was intrigued by how we think, feel, and how our stories, struggles, personalities, all impact how we behave, express ourselves, and interact with this imperfect human experience we are all on.

Through my own personal journey as well as my professional journey helping others navigate their own inner world, I have come to believe very deeply and strongly that we must take the time to truly understand the design of this world within, that shapes everything else. Just as we strive to maximize our physical health and physical potential by understanding our bodies and the specific nutrition it requires to thrive and function at its best, we also need to do the same with the not-so-physical aspects within us. Our inner psycho-spiritual world also has its own design and requires its own nutrition and nourishment to thrive. But many of us are disconnected from our psycho-spiritual facets and needs, because we live in a society that gives importance to things that are visible, physical and measurable above all else. And we are constantly surrounded by societal influences and messages

that encourage us to place greater importance on the rational mind, mental intelligence (IQs), and to depend heavily on what is solely scientific and quantifiable to help us understand and interpret our world and experiences. Anything that is logically and rationally understood and measurable is given a higher priority over anything that isn't. As a result, we burden aspects of ourselves in a way they were not designed to bear, and the not-so-measurable facets within us (such as our spiritual heart) become neglected and viewed as lesser in value.

If we look at the world we live in, the most beautiful and powerful things in life are not measurable or seen. They can't simply be placed under a microscope and be visibly witnessed. We can't scientifically quantify God or love. We can't quantify intuition or energy we feel in certain spaces. There are so many things that shape our world, health, and happiness, yet are not given much importance, because they are not visible to the naked eye. But I hope to play a role in changing this order of importance we have been influenced to abide by in our world. I want us to begin reconnecting to the power of the unseen (*al ghayb*): the aspects within us and outside of us that are very present and very influential in our lives, but are often ignored and underutilized because we simply do not see them right in front of us with our physical eyes.

Unlike the physical world outside of us that we can see with our very eyes, or our physical anatomy within us that we can measure and study, our inner world cannot be seen with the naked eye and is not so measurable. I can tell you where an organ like your kidney, heart, or stomach is located in your body, but I cannot tell you where your ego is located. And interestingly enough, this was a question I was asked by a student when I first started teaching my Heart Over Mind & Ego Method in 2014 at a local mosque. At the end of my class, a young man raised his hand and asked, "*Where is my ego located?*"

This reflects our need as a society to want to make things physical, visible, or tangible. We are uncomfortable with not being able to place our finger on something or know *exactly* where it is. We are uncomfortable with what we can't see or locate. But our spiritual essence, our spiritual heart, our emotions, and even egos, do not need to show up on an x-ray or scan to be alive, existing, and very much a part of all of us. But because we cannot see them or locate them, many do not pay attention to them, and how they influence every aspect of our lives. Our inner psychological and spiritual world is primarily an experiential world. It is real and a crucial part of who we are, but to understand it, we cannot quantify or measure it in a science lab. It can only be known, experienced, felt, and witnessed.

It was this realization that led me to define our inner psychological and spiritual world as our "*psycho-spiritual system.*" I wanted to prioritize the exploration and study of this not-so-measurable system as we prioritize all

other physical systems. I realized that we need to start looking at our inner (psychological and spiritual) world as a system of its own, if we are to learn how to navigate these tools within us in a way that promotes our holistic well-being.

Throughout our world, we will see that various systems exist within it, and each system helps us understand the greater world and universe. Outside of us, we have systems like the solar system and the ecosystem, but within us, we also have biological and physical systems that scientists, doctors, and scholars have given much attention to over the course of history. Our psychological and spiritual system, though, has not been given the same attention in the Western world. In fact, we have never given them enough importance to define it as a system of its own. Without giving the same level of importance to our *psycho-spiritual system* as we do to the biological and physical systems within us, we will continue to neglect higher facets within us (such as our spiritual heart), while feeding and giving attention to lower facets within us (such as our egos).

In today's world, we are constantly being fed with messages that invite us to be led by our lower self or ego-containing self – the part of us that prioritizes our wants over our needs, the part of us that seeks comfort at the expense of vital nourishment we need to thrive spiritually, mentally, and emotionally. We are taught about this ego-containing part of us in Islam as we are encouraged to work on taming our "*nafs*," the Arabic term often used to refer to our ego, self, psyche, or the lowest part of us that is driven by lower-order drives and human instincts such as pleasure, greed, self-importance, comfort, and security. While Islam teaches us that there are different levels to the *nafs*, the *nafs* we often utilize to refer to our ego or desire-driven self, is the lowest level and is often referred to as the lower *nafs* (or lower self). This is the part of us that we are taught to rise above so that we can step into our higher self or our most elevated self. But we can't be elevated to our higher self if we lead from any place except the heart.

In a world where the mind is treated as the ultimate authority within us – and our desires and egos are constantly given an unhealthy level of importance – we have minimized the role our heart plays in our mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Western thought has not done justice to the powerful position the heart holds within our being. In fact, the heart has been subject to much criticism and minimization. It is often depicted in movies, shows, and even in cartoons as the weaker part of us compared to the brain. For example, we see cartoon skits and pictures where the heart has a band aid on it, and the brain telling it, "*I told you so.*" But this heart within you is anything but weak. We just learned to view it as weak, because this mind-worshiping and desire-driven world we live in has tainted and skewed our perception of ourselves, disconnecting us from a great power within us – from the spiritual

essence of who we are – essentially cutting us off from accessing our full potential. Ultimately, we have become disconnected from a holistic and truthful perspective of who we are and what we *truly* need to thrive. As a result, we do not know how to beautifully navigate and utilize the tools God equipped us with in a healthy way. The world we live in has minimized crucial facets within us that God has equipped us with to powerfully and holistically navigate our path in this world. It has deceived us into thinking that our physical desires, mind, emotions, our ego (or *nafs*) can be the leader of our being. And it has made us believe that the heart is void of real intelligence and understanding. And it was only through the teachings of Islam, my explorations of Islamic psychology, my professional work with others, and through my own journey navigating myself and my path to God, that I was able to arrive at a different conclusion, and that is: our heart is not lesser in value or intelligence by any means. Infact, as you will learn through the H.O.M.E. Method, your heart was created to be a leader, and there are great harms that result from making anything other than the heart the leader of your being.

If we make our mind the leader of our inner world, we have burdened it with a responsibility that God did not design it to bear, and what I have discovered is that this burden can play a crucial role in many of the mental and emotional health challenges of today. If we make our emotions the leader of our being, we will find ourselves with no grounding, becoming like a leaf in the wind, and reacting to our every emotion as if they are our God and as if they determine the outcome of our affairs. Worst of all, if we give the position of leader to our ego, we will be led by our lower self (or *nafs*), which is motivated by our physical, material, human whims and desires, and not by our higher self which is God-aligned and motivated by our spiritual and sacred needs.

The most important truth we need to pay attention to, though, is that, whether we are leading from our minds or egos, our hearts will suffer a great consequence, and will be left lagging behind in a malnourished state. When this happens, it is not just the heart that suffers, but our entire being. This is a truth we are taught by Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), as he said in the following *hadith*: "*Verily, in the body is a piece of flesh which, if sound, the entire body is sound, and if corrupt, the entire body is corrupt. Truly, it is the heart.*"[7] The heart's condition impacts everything else within us, but also outside of us. There are many spiritual, mental, emotional, and even physical repercussions when we do not prioritize the leadership and nourishment of our hearts. This is what we see when people have all the money in the world and still feel empty inside, or when people can have the highest education and knowledge, and still present behaviors that go against their *fitrah* (innate truth and nature)

7 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, 52.

and are undignified, abusive, or animal-like. This is what we see when people spend so much of their life filling themselves up with food, drugs, or drowning themselves in destructive habits, to fill a void that is rooted in no other place but the heart. When the heart is malnourished, one will spend all their energy trying to feed other facets within them, such as their egos or stomachs, to compensate. When the heart is not prioritized, one cannot benefit from the knowledge they attain. When the heart is not treated as it should be, one will find themselves like a yo-yo, going up and down with every emotional reaction they experience. When the heart is not the lead, one can never be fulfilled by the temporary, instant gratification experienced by our egos.

There is a great psycho-spiritual power within each of our hearts, and through both my professional and personal journey, I was able to witness the spiritual, emotional, and holistic benefits of making the heart the leader of our being, and the challenges we face when we don't. I myself went through spiritual challenges that were a result of me depending solely on my mind and emotions to walk towards God. I went through struggles in my life that taught me how much the heart is capable of deciphering meanings from my experiences and tests that the mind cannot. I witnessed the same in my work with others. I learned that the mind was *never* meant to bear the burden or responsibility we give it to figure everything out. I also witnessed how our ego (or *nafs*) can get in the way of our inner peace, inner freedom, and heart's purification, which we refer to in Islam as *tazkiyah*. I recognized that our ability to experience true holistic transformation depends on the heart's nourishment, and on the heart being the entity within us that we prioritize. God has allowed me to learn that our mind and ego, as well as our thoughts and emotions, were never meant to be the leaders of our inner world or the final defining authority of who we are and what we choose to do. And it was through my studies of both Islam and psychology, and through my work counseling and providing therapy to others, that I was able to witness more evidence of this truth. I saw the psychological and spiritual harms that many people experienced when they treated their mind as the leader, as if it is the ultimate authority over them. I saw how many people struggled when they worshiped their every feeling and let their actions be prisoners of their emotions. And of course, I saw the immense harm that results when we lead from our egos, from our *nafs*, from a place that constantly prioritizes wants over needs and comfort over growth.

It became clear to me that we cannot experience true holistic health without first understanding the psychological and spiritual tools that God equipped us with, but also seeing the relationship between our psychology and spirituality. This was a truth that I realized within my counseling work, but I also saw this truth surface when I interacted with Muslims in my community and when I taught at spiritual circles (or *halaqas*). I realized that many Muslims are taught

to purify their hearts (the practice of *tazkiyah*) and to tame their egos (or *nafs*), but without a practical way to do that. I realized that there is a disconnect between the world of mental health and the world of spiritual health. People are either working on their mental health without seeing its connection to their spiritual health, or they are working on their spiritual health and growth without seeing its connection to their mental health. A great lack of holisticness and interconnectedness became very evident to me. I saw how people struggled when they worked to apply principles of *tazkiyah*, or purify their heart, without learning how to navigate the other tools and functions within them (i.e. mind, egos, emotions) in service of the heart they are trying to purify and bring closer to God. At the same time, I witnessed people working on their mental health by focusing solely on their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors without knowing how it connects to their spiritual essence and needs. This disconnect between these two realms – the psychological and the spiritual realm – is what motivated the work that I do today to empower the psycho-spiritual wellness of others through an Islamic psychological lens, for Islam has a holistic approach to viewing the human being, an approach that is inline with our very nature, design, and potential. As I noted in my doctoral research study on "An Islamic Psychological Approach to Psychotherapy": "*Islam is a religion that is centered towards the nature of a human being, what is referred as one's fitrah.* ***Fitrah****, is an Arabic word within Islamic teachings that refers to the innate truth we all are born with, a foundational purity and freedom that is within all of us, but we are often disconnected from due to the affects of our own actions, flawed interpretations of our experiences, and the messages we receive from the world.*"[8]

Islam's teachings are holistic and serve to align all the areas within us – the physical, spiritual, and psychological – with the way God created us (our *fitrah*). Therefore, Islam's teachings not only speak to our spiritual needs but to our psychological, social, and biological needs as well. More so, it shows us the interconnectedness between these areas within us, and how important it is to not navigate one area in separation from another.

The Western psychology world has slowly picked up on this truth in the last couple of decades as it strives to incorporate more research and interventions that are holistic in nature. But it was this lack of holisticness and connection between the psychology and spiritual world that showed me the necessity for psycho-spiritual wellness education that can integrate both worlds and provide others with the knowledge and tools they need to understand and navigate their inner world in a way that empowers them not only spiritually, but also mentally and emotionally. Most importantly, I saw a need for psycho-spiritual education that prioritized the heart's nourishment in the learning journey.

8 Assar, M. (2017).

Providing heart-centered learning experiences is rooted in my belief that if we teach in a way that only serves to fill the minds of students, then students will only walk away with minds that are full, and there are many harms to this. When the mind is full and the heart is not, we do not see positive change in our life and in the world. For behaviors to change, for true transformation to happen, the heart must have an experience with the knowledge that the mind absorbs. The heart must walk away *fuller* than the mind. For only when the heart is connected to the knowledge that the mind absorbs, can what we learn translate into real life application. I spent a lot of time in my life reflecting on this bridge between theory and practice, between having knowledge and positive changes, and it became very obvious to me that in the world we live in today, many of us are walking around with minds that are full with information, but have not yet experienced the positive and real effects of that information in our day-to-day lives. So I often explored why this is happening. A clear question that always stayed with me through my explorations was a question my mother used to ask me when I started studying psychology. My mother was often skeptical of the idea that people can truly change, and was always curious how psychology can help people change. When we would explore this together, I used to tell her early on in my studies, that it is the awareness of our inner struggles and problems that leads to change. In response to that, my mother used to always ask, "*But Marwa, is simply knowing the problem enough for change?*" That question never left my mind and heart as I progressed in my studies.

It was my journey to developing the Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method that made me arrive at the answer to my mother's question, which is that awareness of the problem is *not* enough. The mind knowing what needs to change is a crucial ingredient on the path to healing and change, but it is *not* what leads to actual experiential change and transformation. Change requires that the heart is connected to what the mind knows. Applying what we learn requires the heart's activation and prioritization in the process of learning and absorbing information. It is not enough for the mind to have or memorize information while the heart remains disconnected from what our mind is constantly absorbing, learning, and storing. This disconnect is what leads people to feel like they are stuck, that they are "woke" but not awakened, educated but not enlightened, living but not *alive*. This is a truth that became even more cemented in my heart during my time studying at Madina Institute in Georgia, when I heard one of my teachers, Shaykh Mohammad Ninowy once say, "*Information only becomes knowledge when it reaches the heart.*"

This sentence aligned with the work I was doing with The H.O.M.E. Method, but it also really resonated with me personally, as I saw how information

that was just in my mind didn't truly impact my life, but rather it was the information that my heart was connected to that became the knowledge that beautified my life. And that is what true knowledge *does*. It is collected by the mind, but *forms* in the heart, and then motivates the limbs to move accordingly. I learned the power of this truth as well through the works of Imam Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, as he made the distinction between the different levels of having faith. In his volume on Divine Unity, within his book *Ihya' Ulum al-din* (The Revival of The Religious Sciences), he mentioned that faith in Divine Unity (*tawheed*) has four stages, the first stage being what he refers to as the stage of the shell. This "shell" stage reflects a person who outwardly shows one thing but is empty of that very thing within. This can be seen in someone, for instance, who is speaking the words of faith with their tongue while the heart is in denial or heedless of that truth. This first stage reflects how there can be a gap and discrepancy between knowing something in the mind and knowing it in the heart, leading the person to not be impacted inwardly and spiritually by that knowledge.

Whether we are attempting to grow spiritually (in our faith), psychologically, or personally, the heart must be impacted by the truths we absorb when we learn and seek knowledge. And this was my greatest focus through my years of navigating Islam and psychology. When I would reflect on new concepts, I would apply them with myself first. And when I would see their power in my life, I became so excited to share it with others so they experience the same power, too. It was like I was going through my own psycho-spiritual training without realizing it. I thank God greatly for those training periods, because it was the things that served my heart the most that I ended up utilizing most powerfully to serve the hearts of others. God trained me first before I was able to train others. It was the knowledge and tools that I first interacted with in my own life that ended up having the greatest impact on students. Students would say when going through my courses and programs that they felt like I was in their shoes or that I was talking about them specifically as they were learning, and I always think to myself and say, *it is because I was in their shoes.* I know what it feels like to feel so disconnected from myself, so unaligned, and without guidance on how to connect my relationship with myself and my psycho-spiritual wellness to God and His Truths.

There is a great and deep longing in my heart to help others feel more whole as they better understand their design, the different entities and tools within them, and most importantly the interconnectedness between all the psychological and spiritual facets within their being. Through both theory and practice, I want to help others experience the meaningfulness, sweetness, power, beauty, and liberation that can come when we connect our psychological

and spiritual world together, when we see how the tools that God equipped us with impact each other, and how they are all ultimately designed to help us navigate our path in this world and our way back to Him.

As a result, I have developed the H.O.M.E. Method to help others reignite a powerful connection to the way God has made them, and to gain a more truthful and holistic understanding of who they are and their design. My motivation to develop the Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method, to teach it at The H.O.M.E. Institute, and to write this very book about it that is in your hands, is rooted in my belief that many of our struggles and lack of inner peace and harmony call upon us to align the world and *psycho-spiritual system* that God created within us.

Implementing the H.O.M.E. Method first and foremost in my own life has led me to experience more fulfillment from my relationship with myself, my Creator, and changed the way that I approach my tests and challenges. It is not a station I have arrived at, nor is it a station of perfection, for I am always a work in progress. It is a *journey* that requires constant effort but brings many benefits for me on a spiritual, mental, and emotional level. I have seen these same benefits reaped by students I have worked with who learned the H.O.M.E. Method and how to apply it in their lives. And it is my prayer that it will do the same for *you.*

The H.O.M.E. Method is designed to empower your psycho-spiritual awakening, alignment, and holistic well-being through teaching you to give your heart back its rightful position of leader within your being. And it is my deepest hope and desire that it can be a means of helping you improve the relationship you have with God, yourself, others, and the way you interact with the experiences you go through in this world. At its core, the H.O.M.E. Method is designed to help you transform, rectify, and align your inner world, for I believe the condition of our inner world is what contributes to the condition of the world outside of us. This is a truth that God teaches us in the Qur'an, when He says: "*Verily, Allah (God) does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves*" (13:11). This verse has been the motivation for my work from the very beginning. It teaches me that *heart*-work, the purification and liberation of our heart, the healing of our emotional wounds, the settling of our minds, the taming of our egos, and the healthy navigation of our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are all necessary contributions to the spaces we exist in, whether it be our homes, our community spaces, our mosques, where we work, or the greater world around us.

The work we do on ourselves and our own heart *matters*. The efforts we put forth to align the inner world within us impacts the world outside of us. Therefore, it becomes crucial that we understand this psychological and spiritual (psycho-spiritual) world within and align it with its Lord, for God tells us in the Qur'an, that He is *Rabb Al-Alameen*, the Lord of all worlds. That includes the world and universe within *you*.

Rabb Al-Alameen[9]
There is a world outside of you
And a World Within You
And He is The Lord of Both[10]

9 Translation: Lord of All The Worlds

10 Poem by the author.

Student Experiences of *the H.O.M.E. Method* at The H.O.M.E. Institute

"Through the H.O.M.E. Method, Dr. Marwa Assar taught me the spiritual, mental, and emotional power of being comfortable with uncertainty and not burdening my mind to always have an answer to every problem. The concept alone of not leading from the mind, helped reduce my anxiety greatly. What also helped reduce my anxiety was learning to rely on God more than I rely on myself. Through this, I learned to not burden myself with carrying more than I can bear. Through the H.O.M.E. Method of leading from the heart, I felt myself experiencing more days where I felt more authentic, reflective, alive, aware, present, and intentional."

— Rabeia

"Dr. Marwa Assar's Heart over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method to psychological and spiritual wellness was a true game changer for me. It helped me understand why I was stuck in an endless loop of trying to make logical sense of my circumstances, both personally and socially. By learning to lead with my heart instead of my mind and ego (or nafs), the H.O.M.E. Method allowed me to live a much lighter, less worrisome life. I gained a renewed ability to be present, to feel closer to my authentic self, and an increased trust and reliance in God. I frequently refer back to the H.O.M.E. Method to help me navigate challenging events or when I'm trying to traverse the unknown because it keeps me grounded and aligned, allowing me to use the tools that God has endowed me with for their intended purpose. Dr. Marwa Assar's ability to connect psychological best practices with conscious spiritual awareness serves as a much-needed bridge between these two crucial disciplines."

— Nazim

" Remarkably, the Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method led to a substantial reduction in my anxiety, liberating me from overthinking and self-doubt. It equipped me with valuable tools to enhance my presence during prayers and acts of worship. Through the H.O.M.E. Method, I developed greater authenticity, the ability to articulate my thoughts and emotions without the burden of fearing others' reactions, and I gained a newfound comfort in my own skin, freeing myself from the constant need for validation from others. The practice of gratitude (shukr) also became a daily ritual, fostering a sense of contentment within me."

— Isra

"The H.O.M.E. Method helps relieve us of the mental and emotional burdens we choose to carry ourselves. Through this approach, I learned to lead from the heart, to entrust my affairs to God, to recognize that the comprehension of our mind is limited, and the balm for our ego's angst is remembering ultimately nothing is in our control. Being able to differentiate these different faculties (heart, mind, and ego) allowed me to gain a greater awareness of what was driving my actions. This has allowed me to strive to be more intentional, feel mentally and emotionally lighter and grounded. It has helped me to untie the knots of confusion that sat between me and my relationship with God. It relieved me of the burden I place on my mind to always be perfect – which always robbed my spirit of vitality and my heart of sincere intention. I am deeply grateful for the work Dr. Marwa Assar has done in making this knowledge accessible to us in a way that can easily be understood and applied to one's life. My words here cannot do justice to the impact of the H.O.M.E Method, it can only truly be appreciated as a lived experience."

— Faiza

"Through the H.O.M.E. Method, Dr. Marwa Assar taught me how to lead from the heart and how to make the mind and ego the heart's followers and servants, rather than its leaders, such that each served its proper role and occupied its proper place. Perhaps she was able to do this so skillfully because of her accomplishments in the field of psychology, having received a doctorate degree and having supplemented her studies with several years of practice in the area. Or perhaps she was able to do this so effectively because she has realized the very same knowledge within herself. I felt that whatever she was teaching us she had sincerely applied to herself and, as it had clearly worked for her, so too could it work for me."

— Milad

PART 1

THEORY & FOUNDATIONS

1

Welcome H.O.M.E.

This sacred journey of inner transformation you are on is not so much about you becoming a completely different person, or abandoning everything that is familiar to you. It is not about hating who you are today and only loving the potential perfect version of yourself you hope to become. A true journey of inner transformation is not about disconnecting from who you were, but about reconnecting to what was always true within you, to the beauty that is already existing within your being. It is a journey of becoming whole and authentic, *not* perfect. It is a journey of attaining a sense of inner balance and harmony, a settling and grounding, not a temporary high, an escape from discomfort, or lack of realism. This isn't a journey of spiritual loftiness without a connection to the reality of your human experience. It is also not a psychological journey without spiritual awakening. It is a journey of not just about learning the new but also unlearning the old. It is a journey of return to all that is whole, real, true, safe, purifying, and elevating. It is a journey to who God created you to be all along. It is a journey home.

My own journey home and living by *Heart Over Mind & Ego* started in 2013, during the first semester of my doctoral program, when I took a trip that changed my life. I visited Madinah and Makkah for the first time to complete *umrah*, the minor holy pilgrimage. And although I believe the work leading to the H.O.M.E. Method started years earlier, this was the trip in which *Heart Over Mind & Ego* started to clearly present itself to me. I was 26 years old at the time, and it was the first time that I would be visiting Makkah, the city of the holy *Kaaba* (God's house) and Madinah, the city of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). This trip, for so many reasons, was a pivotal event in my life. It was my first time in Madinah and Makkah. It was there that I received answers to questions I had been asking for years. And it was there that I believe the seeds that were planted years ago began to set roots. It was the beginning of so much, and I didn't even know it.

Despite it being such a pivotal turning point in my life, this trip was not an entirely pleasant one. It was also painful and uncomfortable. I had received difficult news when I was there which added great emotional weight, and what made it worse was that I was having a hard time connecting with the spiritual experience of it all. Spiritually, I felt disconnected because I was very much in my head about how I *should* feel and how my experience should look, that I had

no energy left to actually just let my heart connect to what it was witnessing. I was going through the motions and not feeling the fruits of it.

It still was a very special trip, and a trip I knew God designed to serve my path to Him, my journey to recognizing He is my Greatest Love, and my journey to my own growth, healing and to serve others through the work I do today. Just simply being in the sacred lands of Madinah and Makkah is a tremendous gift, but I wanted more. I wanted to feel a stronger sense of connection to God, to my acts of worship, to what I was doing, and to myself. But connection requires the heart to be present with what it is experiencing, and I hadn't yet learned how to do that. Back then, my heart's voice was drowned by the loud authority of my mind. And it was spiritually, mentally, and emotionally exhausting.

I remember very clearly the moment in which I was walking towards the *Kaaba* for the first time. Prior to this moment, I had heard many times from others that seeing the *Kaaba* for the first time was such an emotional experience for them, and that it was so overwhelming and powerful that one cries when they first see it. I heard this from teachers and friends who visited before me. So, as I was walking towards the *Kaaba*, I remember being so worried that I wouldn't cry, because that is what I thought *should* happen. And if I didn't, what does that say about me and my faith? It sounds so silly now, but many times we get caught up with the idea and image of what religiousness or spirituality looks like, that it interferes with our actual ability to have a sincere and fulfilling spiritual experience. And we do this in a spiritual sense, but also in many different ways, where we often get caught up and attached to the *idea* of something rather than the actual experience of it. For example, many people are more attached to the *idea* of physical fitness and what being fit and healthy *looks* like, rather than focusing on the internal experience of what being healthy actually *feels* like.

This was an experience that taught me the spiritual harms of leading from my mind and how our psychology – our thoughts, emotions, and core beliefs – can interfere with our spiritual experience. As a psychologist now, I know that psychological barriers exist, and can keep us from a fulfilling relationship with ourselves, others, but also with God. The mind is a powerful entity that holds all of these perceived ideas and thoughts of how things should appear, and that can be a great psychological barrier to our spiritual growth. But on my own journey H.O.M.E., I learned that the heart has the power to connect to what actually *is*, to what is true, and not to the illusion of what *should* be.

When I finally did reach the *Kaaba*, I didn't cry. And that is what I was focusing on the most. Here I was in the most sacred place in the entire world, and all I was focused on was, *Why didn't I cry?* And ironically, *that* actually

made me cry. I was so heart-broken and disappointed in myself. I felt so disconnected. My mind just would not let my heart have its moment. This was the experience that started directing me to the necessary work of leading with my heart and the sacred alignment that my inner world needed.

Since my first visit to Makkah and Madinah, I was blessed to visit again five more times. After spending the few years after my first visit doing the work of leading from my heart, I was able to witness a heart-led, powerful, and nourishing experience every other time I was able to complete *umrah*. I cried every time I saw the *Kaaba*, but not because that is what "spirituality" looks like, but because I stopped giving my mind the lead, and I started letting my heart do what it already knows how to do, which is connect to the One who created it. But it wasn't just the experience of my first *umrah* that taught me the power of leading from the heart. This was just the beginning.

When I returned from my first *umrah* trip in 2013, the work to lead from my heart continued to call me even more powerfully. It was a difficult time in my life, in which I was still coping with the news I received during *umrah*, but it also was a time where previous unresolved trauma started to surface and get my attention. A few months prior to going to *umrah*, I had just moved to the west coast to start my doctoral studies. I had not planned on moving all the way across the country for my program, but it all happened so fast. I found a program that fit me, and before I knew it, I got accepted. Several months later, I was moving my life to California to start my doctoral journey. Back then, I wasn't a person who traveled much and I had no intention of moving out of my state, yet alone the entire east coast, and leaving everything and everyone that was familiar to me. I was in my comfort zone with my family, community, friends, and support system. But little did I know that God was going to take me out of that zone in a way I didn't imagine. The program I applied to just called my heart. And when I prayed about it, consulted with my parents and religious teachers, everything just seemed to be going smoothly and facilitated. It just felt so meant to be. But within months of moving to California, I knew even more how meant-to-be it was.

For as long as I remember, since I was a child, my heart was highly sensitive to what it experienced. I felt things very deeply internally, both my joys and my pains. And I was always very much hyper-attuned to the emotions, pains, and needs of others. I could walk into a room and immediately sense the energy and feelings of loved ones. I was often able to recognize the smallest emotional shift in someone, and be able to pinpoint what my family or friends were feeling in a particular situation, sometimes before they themselves were able to put into words how they felt. This sharp attunement to emotions and pain, especially within myself, always made me feel like something was wrong

with me, like I felt *too much*, sometimes more than I felt I could handle, and it was only in my adult years, that I learned the meaning of being an *empath* and a *Highly Sensitive Person* (HSP), which is someone who has a deeper and heightened sensitivity (within their central nervous system) to emotional, physical, environmental, and social stimuli. This helped me make better sense of what I was experiencing, and why I tended to process things on a deep level. And while I enjoyed the ability to feel so deeply throughout my life, growing up, I struggled to navigate this in-depth processing, hyper-attunement to others, and to understand myself in a world where "sensitivity" signified weakness. I didn't know how to hold a non-judgemental space for my deep feelings, and I often didn't know how to express them. Instead, I often minimized them, buried them, and essentially "gas-lit" myself, while giving greater compassion and importance to attending to the emotions, needs, and pains of others. I was giving to others what I desperately needed the most of.

But this hyper-attunement to others took so much of my energy. So, as you can imagine, especially if you are an empath or HSP yourself, this was quite emotionally exhausting and draining, and why I gravitated to taking long walks, being alone with God, being out in nature, and having time alone to recharge, especially after being around people for long periods of time. But I truly didn't realize how consumed and hyper-attuned I was to others, until I finally settled into my apartment in California, and found myself feeling so empty and lost. The silence of not having anyone to pay attention to, and the guilt of not being home and available to my family and close friends was so overwhelming that I cried so much. I felt selfish for leaving them. But most importantly, I felt like, *What do I do with myself now?*

This was a period in which I started to notice how greatly disconnected I was from myself, my inner world, my emotions, and needs, and how much I lived from my mind and its harsh, self-judgemental, and self-critical voice. It was in this period, especially after I returned from my first *umrah*, in which I came to more deeply know the great harm in leading from my mind and letting every thought I have control the direction of my emotions and how I felt about myself, my worth, my relationship with God, and my life. But despite this period of my life being a very difficult one, it was also what taught me the most powerful treasures, the treasures that became the foundation of me learning how to lead from my heart and developing the H.O.M.E. Method.

I have always said that being an empath and a HSP is one of my greatest blessings but also, one of my greatest challenges in life, a challenge I had to learn to navigate, and this was the beginning of me learning how to do that. It was like God uprooted me to introduce me to Him and myself on a whole new level. It was the beginning of a deeper spiritual and psychological journey

to renewing my relationship with God and with myself. And although I was always immersing myself in the self-help, psychology, and self-development world, and constantly doing work on myself up to that point, it was then that the real and hardest work began. It was during this time that I began becoming very attentive to this world within me, more than I had ever been. It was almost like the volume of my inner world was turned up after many years. It was always there, always speaking to me, but its voice was not as sharp and often drowned out by the voices of others that I was more attentive to.

I started to become friends with my inner world, and I started to learn how to hold a non-judgemental space for my passing thoughts and feelings. It was during this time that I started to gain a greater and deeper connection to myself, to the truth of who I am, and to God's ever-living presence in my life. It was in 2013 that I learned to settle into the stillness, to sit more deeply without distractions and allow myself to begin processing the pains buried deep within me that I minimized and ignored for so long, the kind of inner clutter that was rooted in trauma that I never really sorted out. It was then, when I was living alone, that all the needs I neglected by putting others first, came to the surface, screaming for me to finally pay attention. I had no choice but to take it all to God's door, to turn to Him for guidance, and to turn inward and begin navigating this inner world that I now saw as a means of guidance as well. I would take long walks and reflect on God and His role in my life, and how my varying emotions and experiences can be a means to connecting with Him on a deeper level and accessing from Him what I was missing and needing to thrive. This was the beginning of a healing journey of great pain, great confusion, but also great unlearning, great joy, and essentially a journey of coming home to myself, to God, and who He wanted me to be.

During this period, I was also beginning my doctoral research study on Islam and psychology, which allowed me to immerse myself even more deeply into exploring psychological well-being through Islamic teachings. Through these explorations, I started learning more about the role of *waswasa* in our lives – what we call in Islam the whispering of *Shaytan* (Satan) – and how *waswasa* can interact with our own psychology and our own experiences and difficulties. I recognized that not all our self-critical or negative thoughts can come from ourselves but also from *Shaytan*, all the more reason to not give such an unhealthy power to our mind and our thoughts. It was through this realization and application of this truth that the self-critical thoughts began to no longer consume me, and I began learning how to take back the power I gave to my mind and *Shaytan* to tell me who I was, to interpret my experiences and traumas, and to tell me what God thought of me. I started to understand the power of our ego (or *nafs*) and how it can interfere with the God-given roles

that our mind and heart were designed to fulfill. I started to experience the liberation and beauty of a heart-led love and compassion for myself and my journey, that was rooted in God's love and mercy for me. This is when I came to know, on a much greater level, the true sweetness of being alone with God, the power of silence, and how God can be enough for each of our hearts. It was then that I realized the immense gift of our hearts, and its natural innate power to connect to its Creator, to the present, and to truth. And it was then that I learned a very powerful truth, that God is, was, and will always be my greatest Destination and my greatest Love.

This was the time that I truly saw the beauty and power of my sensitivity and empathy, and how it contributed to who I am. The same ability I had to deeply feel pain and difficult emotions, was also what allowed me to deeply feel God's love, and the joy and peace of being present with Him, His blessings, the world He beautified outside of me, but also the world He beautified within me. I saw how being an empath and being hyper-attuned to both beauty and pain, was not just a challenge, but a tremendous gift that God gave me to navigate the world and serve it in my own way. And so, while this world can overwhelm my heart to pieces sometimes, I will always *choose* to feel, to be connected, to be sensitive to it all, because it is the way my heart understands what it witnesses and I wouldn't choose any other way to walk my path in this world.

It was during this period that I started to experience the force of my heart, its intelligence, its grace, its mercy, and how important it is that I no longer belittle its experience, but rather, that I give it back its rightful position of leader within my being. At the same time, as I became even more immersed in Islam's view of psychology, and the more I searched the Qur'an and the *sunnah* for a psychological understanding of who we are, the more I came to know the power of the heart, and the importance of aligning our inner world with the One who created us. But it was my personal struggle of taking back the power I gave my mind and my *nafs* to lead me that really taught me the experiential power of leading from my heart. It was then that I learned the importance of understanding and navigating the psychological and spiritual facets within me, or what I have come to call our *psycho-spiritual system* in the H.O.M.E. Method. It was then that I learned the harms of giving the position of leader within that system to anything except the heart. Above all, I learned that this journey I am on will always be about *God and me.* Everything else changes, circumstances and relationships, but the one relationship that is infinite is my relationship with God. This relationship is constant and always there. Realizing this truth led me to buy myself a wrist band that was engraved with the words "God & Me" with an infinity sign on each side, to remind myself that, at the end of the day, it will always be about my Creator and I. Years later, this truth

is what inspired the name of *The God & Me Program*, and why I teach students the importance of transforming not only their relationship with God, but with themselves, because these two relationships are the most important, and the only relationships we actually have control over.

Looking back, it is clear that this period of being very much in my head, of not knowing my worth and value through God, was the perfect setup for me to grow, and it taught me how our tests in life are how God molds us to become who He wants us to be. I look back and I know that God put me through certain struggles to teach me through *experience*, not just through being in a classroom at school. It was God's classroom that taught me the foundations that led to this work. Without His custom-tailored tests and experiences for me, I would not have been able to truly know what it means to align my inner world and lead from my heart, or help others do the same.

It was my own struggle and journey to giving my heart back its rightful position of leader within my being, that led to me using the phrase "*Heart Over Mind & Ego*," and how leading from my heart made me "*feel like home*," another phrase I used to express how peaceful and aligned I felt within when my heart became the lead. And when I started sharing my *Heart Over Mind & Ego* approach in classes I taught, online writings, or with loved ones, I saw how it made others feel like home, too. These experiences only reinforced the power and necessity of teaching the H.O.M.E. Method. Along the way, God also gave me signs that made me feel I was onto something real and powerful, and I will be sharing with you these signs throughout this book. One of those signs occurred when I had finally decided to launch my institute (a few years after developing the method), and was looking for a name that included the phrase "Heart Over Mind & Ego." It was a family member who said to me, "*What about HOME?*" And *that* was the first time that it hit me, that my Heart Over Mind & Ego approach – that I always have said led me to *feel like home* – actually stands for HOME. This actually reflects my experience as an HSP, and how I am programmed to process things so deeply that sometimes I miss the obvious truths on the surface. I was more focused on the inner experience of *living* by the method and would always just say "Heart Over Mind & Ego," but I never focused on the acronym for it. I knew more than ever that this was God's planning and miracle. This realization in itself *felt like home*, like it was meant to be, as it just resonated with my heart and my journey. It felt like a truth had landed and settled in my heart. I understood that *feeling like home* was a natural outcome of living by the H.O.M.E. Method. This is how The H.O.M.E. Institute got its name. And it is my true belief that by applying the Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method that *you* can also experience a sense of inner alignment and peace, and also feel like home on your soul's journey back to its first and final home.

The reason I would describe my H.O.M.E. experience as *feeling like home*, is because through navigating myself and trying to make the heart the leader of my being, I noticed that I felt this sense of settling within myself. *Feeling like home* is an expression to describe belonging, familiarity, safety, and tranquility, because that is what a home is designed to provide. And this is precisely what I felt when applying the Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method with myself and practicing it in my own life. I felt like I was coming back home: to myself, to God, to the way that I was created, to my purpose, and to the divine truths that were engraved in my soul before I even entered this world.

They say
'home is where
the heart is'
I learned from this
If my heart is
with God
The whole world
can feel like home.[11]

We often forget that before we entered this world, our soul *was home*. It was with its Creator. It was not in this earthly, physical, material world or even within our physical body. While our soul resides in our physical body for now as we travel through this world for a given period of time, our soul is not from here. It belongs to a greater world, the realm in which souls come from, and the realm to which souls return. It does not belong here. Its home is with God and it eventually returns to that home. This is a truth we are always reminded of in Islam, in the Qur'an, and through the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ).

Out of His love for us, God taught us about the truths of where our spiritual essence is from, just as a loving parent would tell their child the truth of where they are physically from. Because knowing where you are from makes you feel more settled and at home in this world. This is why many people spend time, energy, and money searching for their ancestral roots, or why many children who are adopted and grew up with a loving family, often find they still have a longing within them to reconnect with their biological parents.

There is an unsettling within us, a great void, when we feel disconnected from our physical roots. Similarly, there is an unsettling within us and an even *greater* void when we are disconnected from our spiritual roots. Because the reality is, we are not just physical beings. We are first and foremost spiritual beings. Therefore, it is not enough to know our physical origin while living our life disconnected from our spiritual origin. We prioritize our earthly roots

11 Poem by the author.

– the land and country we are born in, the physical DNA that runs through our bodies, and our physical homes in this world – but we forget that our soul has an origin too. It has a home, too, and it is not earthly. And it is not here.

As Rumi, a Muslim poet and a great lover of God and Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), beautifully puts it: "*My soul is from elsewhere, I'm sure of that, and I plan on ending up there.*"[12] God teaches us this foundational truth, that this world is our temporary residence and not where our souls will reside forever. The following verse is one of many that teaches us this truth throughout the Qur'an: "*And He is Allah (God); there is no deity except Him. To Him is (due all) praise in the first (this worldly life) and the Hereafter. And His is the (final) decision, and to Him you will be returned*" (28:70).

Everything eventually returns home. That is what home is, the place of return, where something goes back to where it originated, to where it belongs, and to its source. Our physical human body came from the earth, and is returned to the earth. But our souls came from a loftier, permanent, and more sacred realm (*al-ghayb*, the unseen), and shall return to that realm. Our soul cannot return to the earth, for it is not from there. And the physical body cannot permanently reside in the realm of souls, because it does not belong there.

In the Qur'an, God teaches us about the origins of our creation, the creation of our physical body, and the creation of our soul (or spiritual body). He first formed our physical bodies from the various soils (or clay) of the earth as is reflected in the following verses:

> "*Remember, (O Prophet) when your Lord said to the angels, "I am going to create a human being from clay.*" (Qur'an, 38:71)
> "*From the earth we created you, into it We shall return you, and from it, We shall raise you a second time.*" (Qur'an, 20:55)

In creating our physical bodies, God ordered the angels to search the earth for all kinds of soils from the diverse varieties that exist within it. After God used that soil to fashion Prophet Adam (the first man and father of all mankind, ﷺ), He then created the most sacred part, the soul. God tells us in the verse immediately following the previous one mentioned above (38:71), "*So when I have fashioned him and breathed into him of My (created) soul...*" (Qur'an, 38:72). In this verse, God is telling us that after He fashioned our physical forms from the soil of the earth, He then created for each body the necessary element or ingredient that gives the body life, which is the soul. And just as it is *only* God who can breathe each soul into the physical body that houses it for a temporary time in this world, it is only He who can call the soul back to

12 Rumi (2004).

its home. And when that happens and the soul is called back to its Lord, the body can no longer live, for the element of life within it has left, and therefore the physical, human body that served as its temporary vessel in this world, must also return to where it belongs, the earth.

Humble Origins

The earth
has veins too
Resembling the bodies
of me and you
We are made up
of the same
Differing only
in form and frame
Its body and ours,
so similar
So when the earth hugs our return,
it's familiar.[13]

This is the story of our origin, our creation, our design, and our return. God taught us these truths so that we are not left in this world without guidance and a connection to the truth of where we are from, to where we inevitably return, and to the truth of who we are, which is: "***We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience.***"[14]

Our humanness is the experience we are going *through*, not who we permanently *are*. Who we are *is* a soul, and while our human experience in this world is temporary, our spiritual experience lasts forever. But despite our soul being the permanent part of us and our humanness being the temporary part of us, many of us live as if our human experience will last forever and we neglect the part of us that transcends this fleeting world. Our soul is from elsewhere and its journey does not end when our physical body no longer houses it. It is merely a traveler in this world, and our physical body is its temporary mode of transportation through this human experience. This is why Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us: "*Be in this world as though you were a stranger or a traveler.*"[15]

This *hadith* reminds us that this human world is not our permanent destination and that our soul is merely traveling through this earthly world

13 Poem by the author.

14 Widely-used quote with various attributions. See Quote Investigator (2019).

15 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, 6416.

for a given and temporary period of time. When this period of time ends, our physical body is returned back to the earth, and our soul goes back to the realm in which it came from, back to its Creator, back to its home. But without a connection to these truths, we will live from the part of us that dies, and not from the part of us that lives. We will live from the part of us that is limited and destined to remain in this earth, and not from the part of us that is transcendent and destined to live in the heavens. Doing so causes us to feel a constant sense of insecurity, unsettling, and inner imprisonment. This is a natural result of treating our souls and spirituality as a mere experience, when it is actually the essence of who we are. Our *humanness* is the experience, for an experience is something temporary. It occurs for a specific period of time and then passes. But our soul is not an experience. It is the element of life within each of us. And who are we without life? What can exist without life? What greater gift is there than life? Absolutely nothing.

Yet, we often forget the value of this sacred life within us, and this physical world (or human experience) has a way of disconnecting us from the truth of our origin. It has a way of making us forget where we came from and where we return. This is why God frequently tells us in the Qur'an to *remember* Him, and engage in the practice of *zikr*, which means the remembrance (of God). The word "remember" means you already know that which you are being asked to remember. You do not tell someone, "*remember this or that,*" if what you are asking them to recall is something new and foreign. God tells us to remember because He created our souls with an innate knowing of who He is and the truth of our origin. In fact, before we entered this world, we all testified to the truth of our Creator. This is reflected in the following verse, where God tells us: "*When your Lord asked all the offspring of Adam (before their birth), 'Am I not your Lord?' All of them testified and bore witness to their testimony that on the Day of Judgment they would not say, 'We were not aware of this (fact)'*" (Qur'an, 7:172). This is the covenant our souls entered into with our Creator, when we were home, before we entered this world. This is the truth we testified to on a soul level, that we have a Lord, a Creator we return to, and this is the truth that will remain familiar to our souls as we go through this human experience. But God would not leave our soul in this world without equipping it with the tools it needs to navigate its way back to Him. God gave us eyes to see, ears to hear, a mind to think, emotions to feel, but above all, He gave us the most important tool of all: the heart.

The heart is the greatest feature of this inner navigation system that God placed within us to find Him, to seek truth, to remember who we are, where we are from, and where we return. If God allowed man to have the ability to create a navigation (GPS) tool to help us simply get from city A to city B, did

you think God would not give you a greater navigation system to find your way back to Him, to have the guidance you need to travel this far greater path? As we are taught in Islam, God's love and mercy for us is far greater towards us than our own mother. If a (healthy) mother would never let her child be deprived of her, be left without a link to her, and without giving her child the guidance they need to thrive and succeed, how could your Creator, the Creator of your mother *and* you, give you life, put you in this world, and leave you to yourself? He wouldn't and He hasn't.

In fact, not only did He equip you with a magnificent inner compass and a superior navigation system within you at all times, but He also gave you access to the map, the guidance you need along the way, and in essence, the truth. From the beginning of mankind, God has sent down prophets and messengers, from Adam, to Musa (Moses, ﷺ), to Issa (Jesus, ﷺ), to Ibrahim (Abraham, ﷺ), and to our final and last messenger, the seal of all prophets, Muhammad (ﷺ), to give you the guidance you need to navigate your way back to Him in a way that honors your soul, the element of life within you.

When our soul connects to this truth in this world, to the guidance that God has sent down for it, then it feels connected to a familiar place, its home, and its final destination. We can witness the impact of our soul's union with truth when we see, listen, and read about people who return to God's path and submit to Him. The simple act of saying the testimonial (*shahada*) can be an overwhelmingly beautiful feeling that fills a person's heart with peace and harmony. When I asked many converts to Islam about the moment they became Muslim and declared their testimonial (*shahada*), it was hard for some of them to even describe the beauty they felt. Connecting to truth alone is a settling experience, but nothing compares to the experience of connecting to our spiritual truths. Nothing compares to the feeling of our soul recognizing its truth and where it belongs. As we learn to make the heart the leader of our being and prioritize God's truths in our hearts, what we are doing is allowing our soul to feel like home on its journey back to its permanent home. This is why connecting to truth, and what I call *sacred authenticity*, is the essence of living by the H.O.M.E. Method.

As the soul travels through this human experience for a temporary period of time, our soul will always long for the Source of life itself, the Creator of life, and the One who gives it life. It will always long for God and its final home just like a newborn baby longs for its mother. This longing exists within each of our hearts to help us navigate our path to our Creator. For God would never put us on this earth without a way to link ourselves to Him. But only when we treat the heart as the leader of our being are we satisfying this longing by linking it to its Creator and reminding it of its final destination. In essence,

by making the heart the leader of our being, we are living from our souls, and only then are we living in a way that is in line with our innate truth and design. Only then can our soul be at peace.

When our soul is at peace in this world, it returns to its Lord in a state of peace. God speaks about this tranquil and peaceful soul in the Qur'an and how He greets such a soul when its time comes to leave this world and the physical body that temporarily houses it: "*O tranquil soul! Come back to your Lord; well-pleased, well-pleasing. Enter then among My servants, And enter My Paradise!*" (89:27-30).

This is how God welcomes this type of soul back home: a soul that was connected to Him in this world, a soul that longed for Him before it returned to Him, a soul that strove to get closer to Him, and be in line with His truths. He greets such a soul with such love and allows it to enter the greatest of destinations, a place in which a soul can be united with its Beloved. But for our soul to be welcomed home in such a way, we must first give our heart a sense of home in this world. To experience the *jannah* (heaven) of the next world, we must first taste the sweetness of *jannah* in this world. As Ibn Taymiyah (ﷺ) beautifully stated, "*Truly, there is a heaven in this world, (and) whoever does not enter it, will not enter the heaven of the next world.*"[16]

The heaven of this world is not the physical heaven we are taught exists in the next world. And it is not a heaven that exists in the world outside of us. The heaven (*jannah*) of this world exists in the world within: within our hearts.

If we give our soul a taste of its home, our heart becomes a *jannah*, a heaven. It becomes a place of peace, tranquility, security, freedom, and – most important of all – a home worthy of being beautified by a great love for and from our Creator. But when we deprive the soul from experiencing a sense of home, this heart within us becomes the complete opposite, a hell. It becomes a place of chaos, instability, malnourishment, and the home of a great void. This inner void and emptiness in turn then keeps our lower self (the *nafs* or ego) in a constant state of dissatisfaction and with an unrelenting thirst, never quenched or resting, and constantly in search for the next temporary pleasure, in an attempt to fill that deep void and emptiness.

But when we become deeply connected to the fact that the most permanent part of us *is* our soul and not our physical body, we will live from that most sacred place. We will live from a place of truth. And we will nourish our hearts in a way that ensures the well-being of this most permanent part of us. Only then, when our heart is connected it to its Creator and all that He created to nourish it (the prescribed acts of worship, the right knowledge, the right connection, the right people, the right environment, etc.), can we reconnect

16 *Madārij al-Sālikīn*, 1/452.

with our *fitrah* (our innate truth) and our soul can be fueled to remember where it came from, its origins, its Creator, and its final home. As a result, the soul experiences a taste of its home because it is connected to what gives it peace, tranquility, and a sense of familiarity as it remembers what it already knows.

We are told to remember
For what we are recalling isn't new
We are told to remember
Because our souls already knew
We are told to remember
What in our hearts was always true
We are told to remember
Because forgetfulness often seeps through
We are told to remember
Until we go back to Who we always knew.[17]

It is not a coincidence that my journey to developing the H.O.M.E. Method started in 2013, during my first *umrah*. Whenever I try to articulate how I feel about visiting Madinah and Makkah, the phrase I always find my heart speaking is also "*it feels like home*." There is something about visiting Madinah and Makkah that leaves your heart feeling like it belongs there. And while Madinah and Makkah differ in the experience they provide to the visitor, one can't help but feel settled in both of them immediately, as if one has always lived there and never left. They both are places in this world that have a way of not only welcoming your heart but also opening it up to receive what it needs. I believe this is how God designed it. They are places that call our hearts, and set the perfect environment for us to align our hearts with the One who made it, while reminding us of our God-given purpose, path, and the covenant each of our souls took before we even lived a day in this world, the covenant of *La Illah Ila Allah wa Muhammad Rasul Allah* (There is no god but Allah (God), and Muhammed is His messenger). It makes sense then why we would *feel like home* visiting the *Kaaba*, the first house God established on this earth as a place to uphold the very testimonial that our souls bore witness to, that we promised to uphold as Muslims, as people who, by literal definition, chose to *submit to God*. It is where our soul remembers its eternal home, where it came from, Who created it, the promise it took, and where it is meant to return to.

"*And (mention) when We made the House (the Kaaba)* ***a place of return*** *for the people and (a place of) security...*" (Qur'an, 2:125)

17 Poem by the author.

When our soul entered this world, God gave it prescriptions and guidelines to keep it tied to its home. So, every time we pray, fast, remember God (engage in *zikr*), or visit God's houses established throughout this earth, we are remembering our *shahada*, our testimonial, and in essence, we are remembering our home. And while every act of worship God has commanded us to do gives us a taste of home, visiting Madinah and Makkah allows you to actually experience a physical space that gives you a glimpse of what it means to arrive at your final home. When you visit Madinah, the city of the Prophet (ﷺ), and as you enter his mosque, and walk where he lived, taught, and was eventually buried, you will understand the love he feels for you even though he never met you. You will feel it in the air. You will feel it in your heart. Like a generous and gracious host, his presence in this sacred city welcomes you and makes you feel like home. And your soul will long to be with him when it returns to its home.

When you make your way to Makkah and visit the *Kaaba*, you will remember that this sacred house you are looking at lies beneath the throne of God. And as you circle His house on this earth, you will feel a connection to the angels circling His throne above. You will remember the higher realm in which you came from. You will remember your home.

As you proceed to complete the tenants of *umrah* or *hajj*, you will be following in the footsteps of the greatest people (peace and blessings be upon them) who walked this earth and upheld the testimonial of *la illah ila Allah.* They stayed true to their soul's covenant with its Creator and, as youwalk in their footsteps, you are reminded to stay true to yours as well. As you walk in their footsteps, you will remember the sacrifices they made to live by the truth they bore witness to, and the sacrifices they made to ensure that those souls who came after them would live by those truths, too.

And as you bid these sacred places farewell, you will feel a heaviness in your heart, because the soul got a taste of what it means to be aligned with its Creator, and it won't want to live any other way. So, as your legs carry your heart away, your soul will grieve, because it is never easy to leave one's home. But all you can do is pray that God allows you to keep coming back, so your soul keeps getting a taste of its home, until God eventually calls it back to finally return to its true and eternal home.

Home on Earth

You called me to your House
I answered the call
Felt far and undeserving
But You invited me despite it all

My heart came running
With all its burdens and pains
At your House, all came pouring out
As I begged you to free it of its chains

My eyes are fixed on your house
And I can't look away, my heart just won't let me
Because with every gaze, I feel your Greatness
My heart attached to your House in the heavens above me

Mankind circling your House here
Angels circling your House above
All gathered and unified around your Oneness
Seeking Your closeness, grace, and love

Grateful, humbled, and full of awe
For what You invited me to
Please invite me again and again
And keep my heart coming back to you

It pains me deeply to leave what feels like Home
And I'm scared to carry my heart away from here
So wherever I go, make my heart a worthy home
Until I reach my final Home, with You forever near.[18]

-Umrah, 2016

18 Poem by the author.

2

Honoring Our *Whole* Being

When we look at the field of mental health in the West, we will see that it is limited in its approach to understanding mental, emotional, and behavioral struggles, as well as psychological disorders. This is something that stood out to me in my 10 years of studying psychology and training to be a psychologist in the West. We are taught to look at psychological disorders through a multi-factorial lens, where we understand that there are several factors that can be associated with the development of certain disorders. The factors that we look at are biological factors (brain physiology and chemistry as well as genetics), family history of mental health challenges, environmental factors, a person's lifestyle (substance use, physical activity, diet), and a person's life experiences (history of abuse or trauma). We never declare that a mental health disorder is directly caused by just one of these factors, but that all of these factors have the potential to play a role in a person's mental health disorder. What is missing though from this multi-factorial approach are spiritual factors. We take into account biological factors, environmental factors, lifestyle factors, but rarely give value to spiritual factors. We are negating, dismissing, and ignoring the greatest factor that defines who we are, which is our soul and all that it needs to thrive.

In addition, I saw that the primary focus of mental health is on the brain and chemical processes that are associated with certain disorders. There was no clinical treatment approach or theory that discussed the power of the heart, the soul, and the role that our spiritual facets play in our mental and emotional health. In fact, a very clear truth that I realized through my work is that many of the mental health struggles and challenges that people go through today speak to a crucial factor that is missing, and that is a connection to the heart – and a crucial factor that is present, and that is a great dependence on the mind as well as the *nafs*. There is a lack of wholeness in the way we take care of our psychological wellness, and therefore crucial pieces of the puzzle are not considered.

From Mental Health to Psycho-Spiritual Health & Well-Being

There is this skewed perception that mental health is the health of the mind alone. This emphasis on the mind is in the very name of the field, where "mental" is the focus of health. But when we work on our psychological

health, we are not just working on our *mental* health. We are also working on our *emotional* health, *behavioral* health, our *spiritual* health, and even our *physiological* health, for everything is connected.

But the Western psychology world often places greater emphasis on the "mental," over the "spiritual" when it comes to approaching our psychological health. Even when we talk about the practice of being present with our inner world, we call it *mind*fulness, not *heart*fulness. When we talk about having the right attitude or approach to something, we call it *mind*set, not *heart*set. This is why, through the H.O.M.E. Method, I teach concepts like "*heartfulness,*" and "*heartset,*" and not just mindfulness and mindset. Because when we look at the Qur'an and reflect on our experiences day to day, our psychological health is not just rooted in the mind, and that is because our cognition (mental and thought processes), emotions, and behaviors are not a sole product of the mind. As you will learn through the H.O.M.E. Method's Psycho-Spiritual Model, each of the entities of the psycho-spiritual system (the mind, heart, or ego), and their interaction with one another, have the power to influence our thoughts, feelings, and the actions we choose to partake in. But in the Western world, as reflected in the word "mental health," these functions are often just attributed to the rational mind, and not the heart. The heart is often viewed as lesser than the mind. And this came with a cost.

This minimization of the heart has led people to burden their minds in ways that have produced greater psychological distress and spiritual disconnect. And while there are many factors that contribute to the increasing rates of mental illness today, I believe one of the main factors is that we do not understand the holistic design of the inner world within us and how all the facets within play a role that needs to be considered when viewing our whole self. This lack of a holistic understanding has led us to live in a way that is fragmented and not aligned with our purpose.

We need to move towards a whole and holistic approach that views, honors, and seeks to heal the *whole* being, not just fragments of ourselves. And this is the beauty and power of an Islamic psychological approach to our holistic well-being: it does not just focus on reducing the symptoms but addressing the interconnectedness of the whole being and the underlying chaos creating the spiritual, mental, emotional, and behavioral symptoms and challenges we see on the surface. Therefore, through the H.O.M.E Method, I utilize and prefer the term **psycho-spiritual health** (or well-being) instead of just "mental" health, to more comprehensively and holistically reflect the experience of what it means to be healthy psychologically, and that is to be healthy on a spiritual, mental, emotional, and behavioral level.

Moving Towards Wholeness: An Interconnected & Holistic Approach

The H.O.M.E. Method is an Islamic psychological and holistic approach to mental, emotional and spiritual health and wellness, that seeks to honor the *whole* being, and therefore it does not negate anything that God has taught us in the Qur'an and *sunnah*. It takes a muli-factoral approach to our holistic well-being that does not just include the role of biology, environment, lifestyle, but also spiritual factors. God's truth is the ultimate priority and will not be compromised or molded to fit what modern-day psychology or what popular psychology teaches us. The H.O.M.E. Method accepts what is beneficial from modern psychology as long as it is in line with the *aqeedah* (creed) and the teachings of Islam, for there is no greater authority on our mental, emotional, and spiritual health than the One who created us. There is no greater healer than the Healer Himself (*Ash-Shafee*). The H.O.M.E. Method nor I claim to be healers, for He is the Healer. This method only serves as a guide to help support and facilitate your journey of healing and thriving on a spiritual, mental, emotional, and behavioral level, as it brings you the knowledge and tools from both worlds – Islam and psychology – to help you grow, flourish, and free yourself from all that does not serve you, your peace, and your path in this world and the next.

The Journey of Wholeness is a Journey of *Tawheed*

The journey to our psycho-spiritual awakening, alignment, and well-being is a journey of wholeness. It is a journey that emphasizes the interconnectedness between all the areas of our lives, because that is what wholeness is. It is seeing the connection between all the pieces within us and outside of us. Essentially, it is a journey of living by our sacred worldview, *tawheed*.

Islam, at its core, is a religion of wholeness, for it is a religion rooted in a sacred worldview that teaches us that all the areas of our life are connected through God. This is the essence of *tawheed*, the monotheistic worldview. This sacred worldview of "there is no deity (or god) except God," is to view everything in the universe as from God, pointing to God, and as connected through God. The monotheistic worldview sees the unity in the three main relationships that exist in our life: 1) our relationship with God, 2) our relationship with ourselves, and 3) our relationship with others, the world, and nature.[19] It views these relationships as connected and not separate from one another, and as pointing and moving in the same direction, which is God.[20]

19 Bakhtiar, Laleh (2011).

20 Bakhtiar, Laleh (2011).

Through Islam, we see that all our relationships are not only connected to each other, but more importantly, they all are connected to God and point to Him. God becomes our center in which all the areas of our lives are linked to. Living by this sacred worldview creates great harmony in one's life, and living in opposition to this view creates a lot of chaos, confusion, disconnect, and a lack of wholeness. To see our core relationships as separate makes our journey very scattered, which is what is happening in today's world. People do not see how all their relationships are connected to their greater journey to God. As a result, people themselves feel scattered and live in compartments where the areas of their life are separate from one another. This robs a person of great meaning, value, connection, grounding, and wholeness. It is what leads people to only show up as pieces of themselves, but not as whole beings. And it is what is leading to the great separation that often exists between our spiritual health and psychological health, where many people are healing in the absence of a connection to the Healer, *Ash-Shafee*.

Barriers to Wholeness: Secularism & the Mental Health Stigma

We live in a world that is constantly attempting to separate religion and spirituality from the rest of our lives. This is the goal of secularism, to separate faith from our world and to separate our spirit from our body. By doing this, we never become whole. We are forced to abandon who we are, only bring pieces of ourselves into certain spaces, and only present the pieces of ourselves that the world can accept. More importantly, by disconnecting us from our own spirit, we are programmed to make decisions from our lower self that dies when the body dies, and not from our spiritual body and higher self which transcends this temporary world. The collective body as a whole becomes *nafs*-led, ready to blindly consume what the world feeds it.

The harms of secularism infiltrate so many areas of our lives, and our psychological wellness is not immune. Secularism, as well as postmodernism, have contributed to the great disconnect between religion, spirituality, and psychological wellness. It was only in the last couple of decades did the relationship between religion and psychology start to get attention, and I believe it is greatly due to the fact that people realized they were ignoring a fundamental aspect of who they are: their *ruh*. People started to realize that true holistic and psychological wellness cannot exist as long as we are isolating our *ruh* from our human experience. Several research studies have confirmed the psychological power of religion, faith, and spirituality.[21] This

21 Tan, S. Y. (1996); Abu-Raiya, H. & Pargament, K. I. (2010); Barnett, J. E. & Johnson,

is something I highlighted in my research study to support the need for an Islamic psychological approach to psychotherapy and psychological wellness as a whole: "*Religion provides individuals with an understanding of the meaning of life, their purpose, and how to cope with the pain and suffering that is part of the human experience (Boehnlein, 2000)...Boehnlein (2006) highlighted that the understanding of human behavior and the human experience can be parallel in both religion and psychiatry, and that merging their complementary features is crucial for providing a holistic and complete treatment approach to patients.*"[22]

Secularism plays a role in our lack of wholeness, for it teaches us to separate parts of ourselves and not see the key connection between our spiritual needs and our worldly needs. As a result, so many people are cut off from accessing the power that spirituality has to offer their human experiences, including their ability to heal and thrive mentally and emotionally. Islam teaches us that all the areas of our lives impact one another, that our wholeness requires that we see and access God's help through all our experiences, and that we do not deny aspects of ourselves (such as our soul and its needs) to grow in other areas of our life or to fit into certain places and please others.

When we prioritize wholeness and the health of our whole being, we have to see and value the interconnectedness between all the areas of our lives. We have to stop living in compartments, where our relationship with God is on one side, and our relationship with ourselves and others is on another side, where our psychological health is separate from our spiritual health. We have to stop giving only pieces of ourselves to certain areas, but rather show up as our *whole* selves in all areas. We need to strengthen the connection between our spiritual health and our psychological health.

But while secularism plays a role in our lack of wholeness, it is not the only contributing factor to our tendency to view spiritual health and psychological health in separation from one another. Today, many Muslims hesitate to connect their faith and spirituality with their mental health challenges, and I believe there is a crucial reason why, and that is the history of mental health stigma within our religious spaces and communities. Early on, when I first started this journey over 15 years ago to start navigating Islam and psychology, the stigma of mental health in Muslim communities was strong. People were often simply told to "pray more" in response to their mental health challenges in life. A person's mental and emotional struggles were often associated with their level of faith. This of course was a problem, and one that propelled me to explore the relationship between faith and mental and emotional struggles within the Qur'an and *sunnah*. What I found through these explorations was many

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W. B. (2011); Morris, G. J. & McAdie, T. (2009); Post, B. C. & Wade, N. G. (2009).

22 Assar, M. (2017).

examples where faith and psychological struggle were not mutually exclusive. I learned directly from Islam, not from the people, that faith (or *iman*) in the heart does not mean a person can't experience painful and difficult emotions or inner states. In the Qur'an and through the life of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and his companions, we can clearly see the message that pain and faith are not enemies, but actually great friends. In fact, there are no people more tested with emotional struggle than the prophets themselves. Prophet Ya'kub experienced great emotional distress in response to losing his son (Prophet Yusuf), but his faith sat right next to his pain, ever so present in his heart, tongue, and actions. As God tells us in the Qur'an, "*He (Ya'kub) said, 'I only complain of my suffering and my grief to Allah (God), and I know from Allah (God) that which you do not know*" (12:85-86).

Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) was tested more than any other human being. He was born into the world after his father passed away. He lost his mother at the age of 6. His next caretaker was his grandfather, who he lost at the age of 8. He then was taken in by his uncle. In his adulthood, he experienced the great trial of losing his uncle and his beloved wife in the same year, a year in which the Quraysh (a powerful tribe in Makkah) were still trying to hurt him and severely persecute the Muslims. This year was called the year of *huzn*, the year of sadness. It boggled my mind how there can be such a stigma towards difficult emotional struggles in our Muslim communities, when our very faith taught nothing but holding space for those struggles on our path in this world.

Today, *alhamdulilah* (praise be to God), I can say that we have come a long way in making space for psychological health in our communities. Through that process, though, I believe an opposite extreme harm has occurred, which is that in response to the stigmatized association of mental health struggles with low faith (or *iman*), many people have gone to the opposite end, where they completely detached faith from their psychological struggles. The Western world and secularism play a role in this, especially in many of the Western approaches to mental health.

But even within the Muslim community, I found a hesitance in Muslims (sometimes, even Muslim professionals) to acknowledge the role of faith (*iman*) and some of Islam's teachings pertaining to *jinn*, *sihr* (sorcery), and *ruqyah* (the spiritual healing prescription and method that is rooted in the Qur'an and *sunnah*), in a person's psychological health. For example, I participated in a panel discussion at a conference a few years ago where the intersection of Islam and mental health was being discussed. We were asked a question about the role of *jinn* in people's mental health. I responded by saying that in the psychology world, we acknowledge that many factors can play a role in one's mental health (i.e. genetics, environment, behaviors), and as explorers in this

field of Islam and Psychology, I cannot dismiss a factor that Islam teaches us about. God has taught us about *Shaytan*, the *jinn*, protecting ourselves from the evil eye and *sihr*, and so how can I negate something God warned us about? And through several *hadiths*,[23,24] we see how *ruqyah* was advised by the prophet (ﷺ) as a healing for various ailments. I of course am not attributing all mental health disorders or challenges to *jinn* or *Shaytan*, but can *Shaytan*, *jinn*, *sihr*, and the evil eye play a factor in causing distress to an individual on a mental and emotional level? The answer is yes, it is possible, just as it is possible that a poor diet and nutrition or vitamin deficiencies can also contribute to or exacerbate certain mental health challenges. What we eat and put into our physical bodies can also impact the health of our minds and can influence our hormones and emotions. But the answer is also *yes* because many people can attest to feeling better mentally and emotionally after performing *ruqyah*.

Moving towards wholeness and a holistic approach to our psychological and spiritual well-being requires that we stop denying truths that our Creator provided us to beautifully navigate our path in this world. It requires that we stop separating our spiritual experience from our psychological experience, spiritual work from our mental, emotional, social, or professional work, our spiritual healing from our psychological healing and empowerment. So, while it is important to seek out what benefits us from our world as Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us, we can't do so while minimizing what benefits us from God and the truths He has provided us from His great and infinite knowledge.

> "*... Strive for that which will benefit you, seek the help of Allah, and do not feel helpless...*"[25] — Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ)

The Psychological Power of Faith

Islam is a way of life that is centered around the truth and nature of the human being (our *fitrah*), and therefore its teachings are created to address and satisfy the needs of our truth, or nature. Everything Islam teaches within the Qur'an and *sunnah* is designed to enhance our spiritual facets without neglecting or minimizing all other facets and needs (i.e, physical, psychological,etc) that are also important in our human experience. Islam is a way of life that is designed to elevate the well-being of the human being on all levels. Each of God's prescriptions serves us not only spiritually, but also mentally and emotionally. Each act of worship has psychological powers and benefits,

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23 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, 5739.

24 *Sahīh Muslim*, 2185.

25 *Sunan Ibn Majah*, 79 (Sahīh Darussalam).

not just spiritual ones. Therefore, when it comes to healing or growing on a mental and emotional level, we have to prioritize God's prescriptions as much as we prioritize clinical therapeutic approaches. But many times, especially in our world today, we separate mental and emotional healing from our religion – thinking they need to be separate for us to grow and heal – not realizing that Islamic teachings not only have the power to enrich our healing experience but also complement, supplement, and add great meaning to the Eurocentric and Western approaches utilized in therapy today. As I noted in my research study:

> *"There are innumerable psychological and therapeutic components that are incorporated in the Qur'an and the traditions and sayings of Prophet Muhammad (Hodge & Nadir, 2008; Mohamed, 1996, Utz, 2011; Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2011). ... Like western counseling, which promotes specific values, Islam also has a number of values that it promotes through its teachings (Hodge & Nadir, 2008; Abdullah & Nadvi, 2011; Utz, 2011). Some of these predominant values are knowledge, reflection, moderation, self-control, community, prosperity, interdependence, complementary gender roles, and identity rooted in faith and spirituality. These values amongst many others provide several suggestions for clinical practice (Hodge & Nadir, 2008). The Qur'an itself has several psychological and therapeutic components that address the cognitive, emotional, and spiritual aspects of a human being (Lubis, 2011; Al-Domi, 2012; Ahammed, 2010; Qureshi, 2011; Geels, 1997)."*[26]

My research was designed to explore not only how Islamic teachings can empower and speak to a person's psychological wellness, but also how they can be incorporated into psychotherapy to benefit Muslim clients. In the results of the research, several Islamic teachings were identified to be very helpful when incorporated into therapy with Muslim clients. Key aspects of Islamic teachings that were identified were the Qur'an itself and its message and stories, *hadith*, *zikr*, *dua*, God's Names, and the use of specific Islamic concepts and teachings such as mercy, justice, patience, balance, the hereafter, and submitting to God. In addition, one of the main themes that came up is that Islamic teachings are in line and compatible with several Western approaches such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Mindfulness, Emotion theories, Rogerian therapies, and even aspects of psychodynamic therapy. My research study, as well as the growing research on Islam and psychology, clearly demonstrate that there is no conflict between Islamic teachings and psychological wellness, but more importantly, that Islam and its teachings are tremendously powerful for the mental and emotional well-being of an individual.

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26 Assar, M. (2017).

Psychology & Spirituality: A Powerful & Mutual Relationship

The H.O.M.E. Method emphasizes the interconnectedness between the areas of our lives to promote our wholeness and holistic wellness. Therefore, we cannot just look at how faith, worship, and our spirituality empowers us psychologically, but we must also deeply understand how psychological wellness benefits us spiritually.

There is great spiritual power in improving our mental and emotional wellness. In fact, the more we work on ourselves mentally and emotionally, the more powerful our spiritual experience will be, and the better we will be able to receive and benefit from spiritual teachings. But, unfortunately, many people work on their spirituality in the absence of working on themselves mentally and emotionally. This is partly due to the stigma that many Muslims have towards mental health, but also is partly due to the misunderstanding of mental health as something you only have when you are diagnosed with a disorder.

Many people think "mental health" is something you only prioritize or even acknowledge when things become difficult. They do not treat their mental or emotional health as something that is always a part of them and that requires their constant care and maintenance. But just like we have physical health simply because we have a physical body, we have spiritual health simply because we have a spiritual body, and we have psychological health simply because we have a mind, heart, and the capacity to think, feel, and act – and they all need our attention and care. They all require that we do not wait until they are completely neglected or harmed for us to give them attention. We have to take preventative measures to care for all the areas that makeup our holistic health.

It is easier, though, to prioritize our physical health over our psychological and spiritual health, because oftentimes the signs of poor physical health are more obvious and seen. Our spiritual health and psychological health are not often so visible and the signs of their decline are also often missed. This is again why I developed the H.O.M.E. Method: to give importance to our psycho-spiritual health, the well-being of the not so measurable or seen facets within us, so we learn to prioritize the care of our spiritual, mental, and emotional wellness.

Psychological Barriers to Our Spiritual Growth

Our psychology can play a great role in our spiritual path. When we take care of ourselves mentally and emotionally, we can remove the psychological barriers that come between us and our Creator. This was an area of particular focus of mine over the last decade, because I saw how our psychology can interact with our spiritual experience. I have come to find key psychological barriers that come between us and God.

The first is our relationship with ourselves. Many times, people place onto God how they feel about themselves. If they hate themselves, they assume God hates them. If they reject themselves, they assume God rejects them. If they are always critical of themselves, they assume God is out to punish them. A person's image of God is often influenced by how they speak to themselves and how they view themselves. For example, a person may have trouble believing God will truly answer their prayers, but not because they don't believe God has the power to grant it to them, but because they believe they do not deserve good things. They feel unworthy of stepping into their dreams and hoping that what they ask God to give them becomes a reality. It is easier to project onto God what we cannot face ourselves. But the more we work on ourselves – and transform the thoughts and limiting beliefs we have about ourselves – we remove great psychological barriers to our spiritual growth. This is a key focus of the God & Me Program, and why I created it, to show the great connection between transforming the relationship we have with ourselves and transforming the relationship we have with God (and vice versa). I have seen and worked with many people who developed a great and fulfilling relationship with God after they improved their self-worth and transformed the relationship they have with themselves. I have seen the opposite to be true as well: that when we work to transform our relationship with God, our lens of who we are transforms as well. So, both relationships need to be worked on together, or one can become a barrier to the other.

The second most common psychological barrier to our spiritual growth is our relationship with our parents. Parents play a key role in how children form their thoughts and beliefs about God. I always say that parents are the bridge between their child and God, for when the child is young, their parents are their whole world. Every word they say matters to the child. Every approval or disapproval affects them greatly. This is how powerful parenting is and why it is such a great responsibility and trust from God. The way parents speak, teach, and raise their children forms the child's later understanding of God.

In the Qur'an, God refers to himself as "*ilah*," and other times "*rabb*." Scholars of the Qur'an say that the word "*ilah*" is utilized in reference to worship, for the word *ilah* on its own means deity or god, and is anything a person worships or devotes themselves to. And no one is worthy of worship and being an *ilah* except God. But *rabb* is often utilized in a broader manner to refer to God and His attributes of being our Master, Guardian, Caretaker, and Owner. Our *Rabb* is the one who cares for us, raises us, molds us, and watches over us. In the middle east, parents are often referred to as "*rabb al bayt*," the caretakers and masters of the house. And parenting and raising children is referred to as "*tarbiyah*," a word linguistically related to *rabb*. So essentially, the qualities of raising, parenting, and molding the character of

another is embodying *rabb*-like qualities. I believe parents are the first people designed to teach us *rabbani* (*rabb*-like) attributes, and they are the bridge God has placed to direct us to Him, *Rabb Al-Alameen*. Children learn about God, His mercy, His attributes through their relationship with their parents.

I have worked with many people who struggle to understand and experience God's love and mercy, because their parents abused the sacred role of *rabb al bayt* that God gave them. When parents don't show their children mercy, it is very hard for a child to grow up understanding that God is merciful. It is not a coincidence that Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) emphasized a parent's mercy to their children. In fact, a man one time after seeing the Prophet (ﷺ) kissing his grandchild Hasan (رضي الله عنه), said to him: "*I have ten children, but I have never kissed any one of them.*" Upon hearing this, the Prophet (ﷺ) said: "*He who does not show mercy (towards his children), no mercy would be shown to him.*"[27]

Mercy towards children is so important that its absence cuts off a parent from mercy themselves. Through this teaching, God is emphasizing the importance of parenting with great affection and compassion, which is what Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) powerfully exemplified. We know now from the psychological research on parenting, that one of the most positive and effective parenting styles is *Authoritative* parenting, which focuses on structure and discipline, but also highly emphasizes the presence of great affection, love, and nurturing. Children who grow up with this parenting style are more likely to have healthy self-esteem, better mental health, and more achievement and success in life. On the other end, one of the most harmful parenting styles is *Authoritarian* parenting, which is a style of parenting that focuses heavily on control, discipline, high expectations, while neglecting or withholding affection, support, and nurturing. Research has shown that children who grew up with this parenting style are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, poor confidence, and aggression. This aggression, as I have seen through my clinical work, is not necessarily just towards others, but oftentimes towards themselves. That is because a person's perception of themselves is often rooted in how they felt their parents perceived them. Their view of themselves is an extension of the way they felt their parents viewed them.

Parents can play a role in a child's distorted view of themselves. And I believe they can also play a role in distorting a person's view of God or faith as a whole. I have seen people hate the idea of becoming closer to God, all because the parent who abused them happened to also be the "religious" parent, the one claiming that God is most important, while hurting those God entrusted him or her with. One time, someone said to me, "*I remember when I was a child, my father hit my mom because I didn't memorize a certain chapter in the*

27 *Sahīh Muslim*, 2318a.

Qur'an, and till today, everytime I hear that chapter, I get hurt and angry." As a grown adult today, this man struggles with the negative association between the sacred words of God and the abuse he witnessed as a child. His father abused his sacred role of being a healthy bridge between him and God.

This is why both psychological and spiritual (psycho-spiritual) healing is important, and why we can't separate the psychological from the spiritual as Muslims, if we truly care about thriving in both realms. Our psychological healing removes mental and emotional barriers that distort our view of God, and keep us from having a fulfilling relationship with Him. Through the healing journey, a person has the opportunity to address the negative thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes they have about themselves, their worth, what they deserve, and oftentimes that includes addressing negative messages they may have received from parents and caretakers. When a person heals, they can recognize how much of their parents' traits they were projecting on to God. This allows them to renew the lens in which they view God and allows them to start accepting what God actually has said about Himself, not what they were subconsciously taught about Him. At the same time, our spiritual work and healing also plays a role in our psychological wellness and relationship with ourselves, as it opens the heart to lead and see the sacred truth of who we really are in front of God, and not through the distorted lens of our parents or anybody else.

These two relationships mentioned above, our relationship with ourselves and our relationship with our parents, are presented to demonstrate how our own psychology can impact our spiritual wellness, and how our psychological empowerment can actually promote our spiritual growth. Everything is connected, and to take a holistic approach to our well-being, we cannot work on one area of our life in separation from another. Our psychological wellness needs our spiritual wellness, and our spiritual wellness needs our psychological wellness. Above all, we *need* God to worship Him, but also to grow spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and personally. God is *Ash-Shafee*, the Healer, but He is not just the Healer of our physical wounds, He is also the Healer of our spiritual, mental, and emotional wounds. We need Him to grow and be aligned internally on all levels. And we are fooling ourselves to think that our mental and emotional healing can ever take place without Him. So as you begin to do the work of living by H.O.M.E., I want to share with you a prayer (*dua)* that I started to say as I was developing the H.O.M.E. Method and one that I still say today and encourage my students to do so as well: *Ya Ash-Shafee (O Healer), heal within me anything that does not serve me, and align me holistically – spiritually, mentally, emotionally, physically – in the best way that is pleasing to You and in service of my peace and success in this world and the next.*

3

Know Yourself, Know Your Creator

The H.O.M.E. Method is rooted in my belief that our inner peace, joy, awakening, freedom, and wholeness is dependent on us turning inward, knowing ourselves, and understanding how God designed this inner world within us. For how can we learn to navigate our spiritual, mental, and emotional well-being without first understanding the great universe that God has created within us? For instance, if you told me that you wanted directions to point Z without first telling me where you are (point A), could I really give you directions to where you wanted to go? The answer is no. One can only know how to navigate a path by first knowing where they are standing. When it comes to navigating the path to God and empowering ourselves spiritually, mentally, and emotionally along the way, we must also know our starting place, and that is ourselves. God, of course, is the Beginning and End (*Al-Awalu Wa Al-Akhiru*), and we would not exist without Him, but YOU and this great world within you, must be understood if you are to walk towards Him, and if you are to navigate your path in a way that allows you to experience greater spiritual and psychological well-being and alignment. We cannot beautifully navigate our way to God without knowing the very means of transportation we are utilizing, which is ourselves.

Without knowing ourselves, we become disconnected from the way God designed us, and we end up lacking a true sense of direction. That is because we become unable to interact with our internal tools in a way that does not serve the purpose in which God created them. Consequently, we may end up placing a burden on these inner tools within us that God did not ask them to bear. This leads to various spiritual and psychological struggles that impact the quality of our lives, our relationships, and the way we walk towards God. Without knowing our inner design, we will be unable to align our mind, heart, ego, and their subsequent thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in a way that is in harmony, unburdens us, frees us, and empowers us.

There is a reason why our early Islamic scholars would say, "*Whoever knows himself, knows His Lord.*" In fact, this statement marked a key turn on my own path and journey to understanding myself in relation to my Creator. When I first heard this statement years ago, I was very perplexed by it. It was strange to me. It was the first time that I came across a statement linking the self with God, which is what I was looking for. I was eager to bridge this relationship

I have with myself with my Creator, but I didn't know how. At that point, I didn't even know how to have a relationship with myself that was in service of cultivating a heart that is sound and in service of my relationship with God. And at that time, I had never heard anyone linking the knowledge of God with knowledge of ourselves. I felt like Islam was sometimes *taught* in a way that pushed people away from themselves. In fact, I remember feeling like we almost had to disconnect from ourselves in order to find God. Years later, when I started teaching about this link (between self and God) in The God & Me Program, I noticed my students having the same experience. One student shared with me: *"Nobody ever taught me before how to have a relationship with God and a relationship with myself at the same time. As I was going through the program, I kept thinking, "Why didn't I hear this before? Why didn't I read this anywhere before? I have been to so many classes and programs, but the concepts I learned in The God & Me program were nothing like I have learned before!"* I realized, from teaching the work that I was doing on myself over the years, that many people shared the same confusion I had early on about connecting our relationship with ourselves to our relationship with God. I believe this confusion is partially due to the way we were taught to crush our *nafs* (or egos), not be arrogant, focus on others, and do things for the sake of God. But the more I navigated Islam and psychology, I realized this was a misunderstanding partly due to language and cultural barriers.

When the word *nafs* is used by scholars and religious teachers, it is usually in reference to our lower self, as there is a strong emphasis within Islam on taming and freeing ourselves from this part of our self that is lower and driven by our egos, human desires, worldly gains, self-importance, and what ultimately does not serve our souls and path to God. But yet, when simply translating "*nafs*" to English, we often just say "self," because that is the literal meaning of the Arabic word *nafs*. In fact, Islamic psychology is often translated to *Ilm al nafs* in Arabic, which if we translate literally would be "*knowledge of the self*." But a person hearing the word "*nafs*" on its own and the importance of freeing ourselves from it, might naturally misunderstand it to be that their *entire* self is what they should be disconnecting themselves from, which is not the case. This is what I thought when I would learn that drawing closer to God means that we do not even see ourselves. For example, referring back to Imam Al-Ghazali's stages of faith that I mentioned earlier, in his volume on Divine Unity, he refers to the highest and fourth stage of faith as the "innermost core," which reflects a level of faith in which a person sees everything through God's Oneness, so much so that one *does not see themselves*. When I first read this, I was very overwhelmed by it. What does it mean to not even see myself? Another concept that I struggled to navigate early on was that *tazkiyah* (the

purification of the heart) required us to realize our innate "nothingness." While I understand these concepts completely differently now and see their immense beauty and value today, back then I interpreted them to mean that I should ignore myself, disconnect from myself, and only connect to myself in service of self-accountability, holding myself to account for wrongdoing. In fact, when I would ask religious teachers about the statement of "whoever knows himself, knows his lord," the answers I received were usually centered around and limited to self-accountability. One teacher told me that this statement means that the more you hold yourself accountable, the closer you will become to God. I agree with this statement, but I know now that self-accountability is not the only way to interact and connect with ourselves. We also need self-mercy and self-love. I didn't know this then, though, and so I absorbed the answers I received about being more accountable with myself, which only reinforced and exacerbated the struggles I already had at the time of being a highly self-critical person. This is a perfect example of how our own psychology can interact with our spiritual experience, and how our own emotional challenges can lead us to interpreting spiritual truths in a way they were not intended. Being very self-critical of myself, I used – or I should say, abused – Islamic teachings to continue being harsh with myself and lacking any form of self-compassion. After all, "self-accountability" is the path to purifying my heart, so what's the harm? Of course, I realized the harm along the way. Viewing my *nafs* (or, as I understood it to be then, my entire self) as something that I needed to disconnect from, criticize constantly, and put second to the needs of others, only harmed me spiritually and emotionally. It first and foremost disconnected me from the tools and beauty God created within me to help me navigate my path in this world and experience a deeper connection to God. Secondly, it instilled in me a fear of loving myself and showing compassion to myself, out of fear of being arrogant and self-absorbed. Thirdly, it left me feeling a lack of groundedness that I craved to feel. Finally, it left me feeling like I could not trust myself, feelings, and needs. This false understanding I had about the kind of relationship I should have with myself was not rooted in Islamic truths, but rather my own interpretation of Islam, an interpretation that was influenced by my own self-criticalness, *Shaytan*, my own traumas and life experiences, and a lack of holistic understanding of myself and my path to God. But the more I studied Islam, the more I recognized just how much God spoke to who we are and our design, and it wasn't the teachings of Islam itself that did not give value to the self, but the way that it was taught and our own false interpretation of it that led me and so many others to believe that seeking God and connecting to ourselves were two contradicting things. This was a belief within me that did not settle well in my heart and one that I eventually learned was not true.

The journey of unlearning this false belief was a challenging one, but one that has led me to much truth and peace, and this statement of knowing ourselves *to* know God played a huge role. But initially, it was very uncomfortable. Recognizing myself, loving myself, being compassionate with myself, and connecting with myself outside of just self-accountability felt so strange and foreign, that it made me approach with great caution. I also found that the same discomfort within me about the topic was also within the religious teachers I would ask as well. That is because the recognition of the self is not something many of us are used to. Depending on our cultural background, societal influences, and our upbringing, many people did not grow up being taught to connect with themselves, love themselves, and to have fulfilling, nourishing, and sacred relationships with themselves. This also became particularly evident to me when I started teaching self-love in 2014 at a local mosque, which was very nerve-wracking for me, because it was a time when self-love was not something I saw being taught in Muslim communities. And I anticipated that the same discomfort I felt towards self-love early on in my journey was what will surface for people as well when I teach it. And it did. As a matter of fact, after my first talk on self-love at a local mosque, I was asked by one of the members to change the wording to "self-compassion."

Many Muslims, especially those who grew up in Eastern cultures, associate self-love, for instance, with arrogance and selfishness, qualities that we are taught to protect ourselves from as Muslims. And I also believe that certain aspects of Western culture also do not promote self-love, as its consumerism culture is constantly speaking to people's imperfections and programming people, especially women, to feel like they have to buy more products or look a specific way to be lovable. So within both Eastern and Western Cultures, are messages that can promote an unhealthy relationship with ourselves. Many Eastern cultures are also very interdependent (and often times codependent), and place greater emphasis on the relationship with others over the relationship with self, and this can cause a person to not develop a healthy sense of self. Western (Euro-American) culture on the other hand emphasizes individualism, independence, and separation, and this can cause its own set of problems. This is why I always say we should never label interdependent cultures or independent cultures as all good or all bad. I believe Islam teaches us balance, to be interdependent when it is pleasing to God and in service of our souls and others, and to be independent when it is pleasing to God and in service of our souls and others. But if all you know and grew up with are the messages of interdependence, it is hard to know this balance, and even harder to see yourself as a separate individual and soul, outside of one's family or community. This was precisely my struggle. I couldn't see myself and my needs as separate from

those I loved. I only knew myself and my worth in relation to my family, loved ones, and the needs of others. Considering this, compiled with my constant self-criticism, you can imagine that my relationship with myself was not a very nourishing or grounded one. It was very much a painful one, for I knew how to turn inward very easily, but I only interacted with myself when it was time to reflect on a mistake. I could pinpoint a mistake the second it was made. I was highly sensitive and attuned to my flaws. That was pretty much my main experience of knowing myself. I knew what I did wrong, what I needed to improve, and how to make a plan to improve myself, but to recognize myself outside of *fixing* myself was very uncomfortable.

The statement, "*Whoever knows himself, knows His Lord,*" played a key role in changing this malnourishing way of interacting with myself. In fact, it stayed in my mind and heart as I progressed forward with my studies, still longing for a greater and holistic understanding of it. I remember trying to explore it from different angles for a long time after, until I finally found what I was looking for. God unveiled the answer at the right time and place in my life, and it was amazing. I felt like I came upon a treasure and a great milestone in navigating myself. One day, while I was out for a walk by the ocean, after I returned from my first *umrah* trip, my heart deeply connected to a truth that I believe was in front of me all along. The answer was all around me, but not in books, people, or a classroom. The answer was somewhere very familiar to my soul, and that is nature, in God's beautification of this earth.

I've always loved being out in nature, spending time alone with God and the beautiful world He created for us, and what I realized during those experiences, is that my love for all that God created in the world always pointed me back to Him. When I witnessed a beautiful sunset, I was in awe of the One who created the sun, made it so powerful in the day, and so peaceful as it set. When my heart would almost burst at the sight of a bright full moon amidst the dark sky, I remembered the One who created such a majestic thing, and couldn't imagine then what my heart would feel if I ever gazed upon the Creator of such a moon, Himself. This connection I felt between seeing the full moon and seeing God was affirmed when I came across the *hadith* of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) in which he told the companions (رضي الله عنهم) on a night when there was a full moon, that they would see God just as clearly as they were seeing that full moon.[28]

Everything in nature pointed me to the Creator. When I would be in the presence of the ocean and find myself in awe of its vastness, depths, and greatness, I couldn't help but think of God who is greater. The beauty of God's creation in the nature and world around me always pointed me back to *Al-Musawir*, the greatest Fashioner.

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28 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, 7434.

The ocean
tells me about God
and I love to listen.[29]

I didn't experience any conflict between knowing God's creation and knowing Him. The more I learned about what He created, the more I felt like I knew Him a little more, loved Him a little more. And in this experience was the very answer I was seeking. I remember standing in front of the ocean that day as the following realization so powerfully yet peacefully settled into my heart: *I am His creation too.* This was a powerful moment and the moment I realized that if everything in nature can point me to God, then why can't everything about myself point me to Him as well? If there is no conflict between knowing and loving nature and knowing God, then there is no conflict between knowing and loving myself, and knowing God. It was that day that I truly felt in my heart the meaning of "whoever knows himself, knows His Lord." It was that day that I realized that not knowing and connecting with myself outside of just my flaws and self-accountability, was actually what is holding me back from a greater, more fulfilling, nourishing, and loving relationship with my Creator. And it was the connection to this very truth that made me realize how important it is to begin the journey of knowing myself. And without realizing it then, I was on the path to developing the Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method and doing the work I do today to help others connect these two sacred relationships, with themselves and with God.

If knowledge of self
leads to self
then we have activated our egos.
If knowledge of self
leads to God
then we have activated our hearts.
The self was never designed
to be the destination.
God is.
The ego was never designed
to be king of our inner world.
The heart is.[30]

After this profound moment, I began feeling more comfortable connecting to myself, not just to my weaknesses and flaws anymore, but to my strengths.

29 Poem by the author.

30 Poem by the author.

I began exploring the world within me a bit more deeply. I realized how little value we give to this inner world. And this was the world I deeply wanted to understand, for it was the world within me that I believed, if I learned how to navigate it effectively, I would find more peace, more inner freedom, and a greater alignment with God, His truths, and the purpose He chose for me. This exploration was not a formal and structured one. It was just me paying greater attention to the role of my mind, heart, ego, and emotions, when I engaged in worship, when I was interacting with God, when I would have highly self-critical and shaming moments, or when I experienced the most nourishing connections with God, myself, and others. Through my natural experiences, I was engaged in what felt like my own personal experiment with my inner world, collecting information about the role and presence of my mind, heart, ego, and emotions and how they interacted with each other. Through these experiences, I realized the power of my heart, and how the heart, if given priority and the right nourishment, brings peace to the rest of my being. Through my own trial and error, I witnessed how giving the leadership position to any other entity other than the heart leads to inner chaos and a lack of inner alignment and peace. And this is ultimately what the Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method was designed to do: to help you pay more attention to a far greater world than the one outside of you, to the one that needs your care above any other world.

The H.O.M.E. Method is designed to help you understand your psychological and spiritual design, so that you can be connected to the most powerful tools within you that were created to help you navigate your path in this world. It was designed to help you stop exerting so much energy trying to fix what is not in your control outside of you and begin exerting energy towards the world inside of you that God entrusted to you. Through this approach, I teach you the role of every tool within your psycho-spiritual system, their purpose, and how they all should interact with each other, in order for you to experience inner harmony, peace, and alignment. For it is my deepest belief that the journey of turning inward is the most worthwhile journey we can go on in this world, for it is the journey that helps us see God, others, and our experiences more truthfully and beautifully. And it is the journey that allows us to feel an inner sense of home on our journey back to our final home.

So let us begin our journey H.O.M.E.

> "*You say that you are just a body,*
> *but inside of you is something greater than the Universe.*"
> Imam Al-Shafi'i (رحمه الله)

4

It is a Journey of Purpose: The H.O.M.E. Method's 4 Laws of Existential Purpose

On this journey of inner transformation and spiritual, emotional, and personal alignment that you are on, it is not enough to know the purpose of the journey itself. It is not enough to know that we are doing inner work to feel better, to grow, or to heal. We have to go back to the purpose of our very existence. In fact, what differentiates Islamic psychology and any other approach to our holistic wellness, is that it is ultimately rooted in our sacred, God-given, and existential purpose.

Our existential purpose is the "why" we are alive. It is the purpose that answers, "*Why did God create me?*" How many of us are deeply connected to this purpose as we start each day, begin a new job, or begin a journey of inner transformation such as this? On this journey of truly knowing ourselves in a holistic and sacred way that produces real and grounding, long-term transformation, it is not enough to take a personality test, to know our strengths and weaknesses, or to identify whether we are an extravert or introvert. True self-knowledge is not about the labels we carry and express to others about who we are. The journey of self-knowledge for the purpose of truly aligning ourselves spiritually, psychologically, and personally, is more about experiencing illuminating truths within us that guide and beautify our outward behaviors. It is not about simply knowing defining factors about ourselves that do not move our hearts and limbs, which is an increasing trend in our times today.

The kind of self-knowledge that translates into real inward and outward changes, requires a deep connection to our existential purpose. Without a solid rooting in one's purpose, we will miss a crucial piece to truly knowing who we are holistically. In fact, we need to know our purpose if we are to truly understand our psycho-spiritual design and all the tools within us that God created to help us navigate our way in this world. Many people today are disconnected from their existential purpose, and I have found that this profoundly impacts one's ability to maximize any journey they embark on. A common mistake that many of us make when we embark on the journey of self-awareness, self-love, personal growth, and inner transformation, is that we do not take the time to connect to our existential purpose: why we were created and why we are here in this world. We may be connected to *why* we

want to start therapy, take a class, buy a self-help book, but are disconnected from the greater "why" behind our very existence.

When such a crucial piece such as our existential purpose is missing from our journey of self-knowledge, healing, growth, and transformation, we will experience a journey that lacks grounding and deep meaning. As a result, the journey is not maximized, the fruits of our efforts become minimal, and we might find ourselves feeling scattered in our pursuit of knowing ourselves, experiencing a sense of emptiness despite achieving many milestones.

The pursuit of knowing and healing ourselves cannot occur in the absence of a connection to our existential purpose and why we exist. In fact, doing so can leave us experiencing a fruitless journey but also experiencing harms along the way. The work of self-awareness, healing, and transformation without a connection to one's existential purpose can leave a person constantly in search of flaws within them that don't exist, fixating on problems in their life that don't impact the more important and bigger picture of their lives, and endlessly searching for meaning in all the wrong places. There is a great void we feel and sense in our lives when we are disconnected from our purpose, and psychology acknowledges this truth.

Existential psychology, a branch of psychology that looks at the human struggle through an existential lens, tells us a lack of connection to one's very existence and purpose creates a lack of meaning in one's life. It also produces greater anxiety and depression. I witnessed many examples of this as a therapist, where clients would walk into my office not knowing why they are struggling. Many times, clients will tell me, "*Everything is going well in my life*"; "*There is nothing wrong*"; "*I have a great family, I have a great job, I feel blessed, and everything is going the way I want it, but something just feels missing.*" When a client isn't presenting signs of trauma or tells you they haven't been through a recent difficulty they are trying to cope with, this void they are expressing points to a lack of *meaning* in their lives.

Our existential purpose provides us with great meaning in life. And I believe a disconnect from our existential purpose creates a deep void and emptiness within us, that no amount of healing, self-improvement, therapy, or achievements can remove. This void is a natural occurrence and consequence of being disconnected from our Creator, and the purpose He designed us for. God created us with a purpose. It is programmed into our design. A disconnect from that purpose leaves us without guidance, meaning, and nourishment. A connection to it, though, leaves us with the foundational meanings, guidance, and fuel we need to reap the spiritual, emotional, and behavioral benefits of our life.

"*Did you think We had created you in vain (without any purpose), and that you would not be brought back to Us?*" (Qur'an, 23:115)

The H.O.M.E. Method is designed to first and foremost connect you to your existential purpose, for only then can you truly understand your design, how God fashioned you, and how to maximize the psycho-spiritual tools He gifted you with to navigate your path in this world. If we attempt to interact with our design and the tools within us without a deep understanding of our existential purpose, we will find ourselves fixing aspects of ourselves and improving areas within ourselves without realizing that everything within us is designed to fulfill a greater purpose. We end up replacing God's purpose for us with our own purpose for ourselves, and in the end, we become guided by our *nafs*, desires, and our limited understanding. This leads us to utilize the tools God gave us in a way that burdens them or even breaks them. Because that is what happens when we interact with anything in a way that is not in line with its purpose. We abuse that very thing.

Abuse is forcing
anything or anyone
to be something
it was never created
or designed to be.[31]

Think of this for a moment. If you have a broken copy machine, what will you start doing to fix it? You will begin examining the machine, inspecting it, and engaging with the design of the copy machine (its entities and tools), in order to make it do what it was designed to do. You will align and arrange what is within the copy machine in a way that allows it to fulfill its purpose, which is to make copies. If you take time studying its design and moving around its pieces, and you still can't make copies, then was knowing its design and navigating its tools of benefit to the copy machine, if it still could not fulfill its purpose? The answer is no. The copy machine would still be discarded, even though we know its design and tools. Knowledge of the copy machine is fruitless without it fulfilling its purpose. The copy machine cannot maximize its potential. Similarly, our path of self-awareness will not be of benefit to us if, after knowing, examining, and navigating our *self*, we are not able to fulfill our purpose.

Purpose is what gives any created thing beauty, power, usefulness, and value. Without purpose, a created thing has no value. This is why God gave us a purpose for our existence, to give each human being immense value in our

31 Poem by the author.

lifetime. But when we disconnect from our purpose, we disconnect from our value and the great meaning of our existence. In turn, the path to knowing ourselves and transforming our lives becomes void of great value and meaning as well. You might respond to this by saying, "*I give myself purpose every day. I live for my kids*," or "*I live for my career*," or "*I live for me*." While God gave you the power to choose your intentions and the purpose behind the choices you make while you are alive, the choice of "why" you were created was not yours to make. You were not alive to make that decision. And a disconnect to that very decision God made for you, will only leave you feeling emptier and incomplete.

Purpose is something I reflected upon greatly in my life as I navigated Islam, psychology, and my work as a therapist over the years. And while psychological research highlights that living purposefully contributes to greater mental health, joy, happiness, and well-being, I believe that we have even far greater benefits to access when our purposeful living is first and foremost rooted in the existential purpose God created us for. But why are many of us disconnected from our existential purpose? I believe our disconnect and lack of rooting in the purpose God gave us for our existence is because we understand purpose in a very rigid way. We do not see the beauty and power behind our existential purpose, and therefore our heart is not moved by the "why" God created us. Therefore, I share with you below the *4 Laws of Existential Purpose* that I have developed and have taught students to help them renew their mind and heart's understanding of their existential purpose. These are truths I have discovered on my journey that have profoundly deepened my own connection to my existential purpose and are crucial to the understanding and experience of the H.O.M.E. Method.

The H.O.M.E Method's 4 Laws of Existential Purpose

1st Law: *Purpose Precedes Creation*

The first law of existential purpose in the H.O.M.E Method is that purpose must always precede creation. Nothing is ever created without purpose. We understand this clearly by simply looking at our human experience. Humans themselves do not make anything without first knowing its purpose. Think about this: did the person who created the pen know the purpose before or after creating it? Do we know why we create something before or after we make it? Without a doubt, we always know the purpose of something *before* we create it. We make art because it creates beauty in the world. We make cars to transport us from one place to another. We make phones to fulfill the purpose of facilitating communication. We make a copy machine to make copies. And, even the smallest thing like a pen was not made without its maker first

deciding that he is creating a tool to fulfill the purpose of writing. A person did not intentionally make a pen with ink in it and a point at its tip, without deciding its purpose. How *then* can we think, that we as human beings, with our 360 joints, a heart that beats about 100,000 times a day, a brain full of neurons that communicate through both electrical and chemical signals, and the millions of cells in our bodies that are worlds of their own, can be created without a purpose or can come to exist without a Creator? God, most High, without a doubt identified for us a purpose *before* we were created.

In the Qur'an, God teaches us about our purpose, why we are here, and why He has given us life. God says: "*I did not **create** jinn (unseen beings) and mankind except **to worship me***" (51:56). Here, God tells us exactly what our purpose is and that is to worship Him. And He uses the word "create." He could have said, "We did not *put you* on this earth, except to worship me." He did not say that, though. He used the word "create" to bring to our attention that our purpose was already known before He fashioned us. He is making us aware of the fact that our purpose to know Him, long for Him, connect to Him, was already *set,* determined, and programmed within our design and being, and we were *created* to fulfill that pre-set purpose.

2nd Law: *Only the Creator Can Set the Purpose*

The second law is that only the creator of something can set its existential purpose (or purpose of existence). Can the pen set its own purpose? No, because it didn't exist at the time when its purpose was being set. A created thing cannot set its own purpose for existence. All it can do is work in a way that allows it to fulfill its purpose. Similarly, only the Creator can set a purpose for what He is creating. Only God can set our purpose. All we can do as God's creation, is to try to function in a way that allows us to fulfill that purpose.

3rd Law: *Purpose Precedes Design*

The third law of existential purpose in the H.O.M.E. Method is that our existential purpose precedes and shapes the design of the thing that is being created. The maker of the pen designed the pen after deciding its purpose. Knowing we are creating something to write, we consequently design the pen in a way that will allow it to write. We equip the pen with the tools it needs to fulfill that purpose. The purpose drove us to put ink inside of it, shape the pen a certain way, and so forth. Without knowing "why," we can't know "how." Knowing the purpose impacts the way we design what we are making.

Similarly, God designed us in a way to fulfill our purpose. And as mentioned earlier, God created us to worship Him. The word used for worship is "*liyu'ibadoon,*" which is the verb form of *ibadah.* Unfortunately, though, many

of us have a limited understanding of *ibadah*. We have really misunderstood what this word means and have oversimplified and minimized it to being solely related to the outward acts of worship that we engage in. This word means so much more than that.

Ibadah has many meanings. It is not just limited to the mandatory acts of worship. *Ibadah* encompasses the following: it is to know God, to love God, to obey God, to serve Him, to submit to Him, to devote one's life to Him, to do good in the world, and to serve His creation. It is knowing His words, His messengers, His book, His attributes. It is knowing His commands and striving to obey them. It is essentially connecting to God, seeking Him and bearing witness to Him (the practice of *shahada*) through everything we go through in our lives. As Ibn Taymiyah said: "*Ibadah is a word that includes everything that Allah loves and is pleased with, whether it be words or deeds, open or hidden.*" He also said: "*...the kind of worship (ibadah) that we are commanded to carry out includes both humility and love. It combines the utmost humility to Him with the utmost love for Him.*"[32] The essence of *ibadah* is the comprehensive experience of humility, devotion, obedience, and love and towards the One who designed us, created us, and the One we will return to. God has made *this* our purpose!

It would only make sense then that God would create us and design us in the way that allows us to fulfill the purpose in which He set. We are spiritual beings designed to connect to God and strive towards the potential He set for us while we journey through this human experience. Everything that God put within us and every detail of our design is in favor of us fulfilling our purpose. He gave us five senses, a brain, a heart, the ability to think and feel, a physical body to house our souls, all to help us beautifully navigate this human experience in a way that allows us to fulfill our existential purpose of knowing Him, loving Him, worshiping Him, and following the guidance and way of life He prescribed for us. The purpose He set for us shaped the sacred design He molded us with.

4th Law: *Purpose Directs You To Understand & Beautifully Navigate Your Design (and Vice Versa)*

The fourth and final law of purpose within the H.O.M.E. Method is that our purpose should direct us to understand and beautifully navigate our design (and vice versa). Knowing our God-given purpose helps us more deeply understand our inner design and why God gave us such powerful tools within us. It helps us understand that we have a heart that is programmed to fulfill its purpose of seeking God and all that is aligned with Him. It helps us understand that our brain is a powerful tool but not our Lord, something we

32 Ibn Taymiyyah (2013).

should not give a power to that only God is worthy of. It helps us not hate our difficult emotions but look at them as amazing features within our inner world that God gave us to help us understand ourselves and to be a means to connecting with Him throughout our lives.

But while purpose helps us understand our design, the opposite is also true. Knowing ourselves and our inner design also helps us connect more deeply to our purpose. For example, if you came across a pen for the first time and have never seen anything like it, exploring and studying the design of the pen will help you understand its purpose. If we took the pen apart, we would be connected to its purpose when we see the ink inside, the point of the pen in which ink comes out, or even its outward shape that makes it easy for us to hold the pen to write. Every aspect we study about the pen will point us to its purpose. It will remind us that the pen is designed to write. But the key here is that you, the explorer of this pen you have never seen before, are *seeking* the purpose of the pen. You came across this pen and immediately questioned within yourself, "*What is this item for?*" or "*What is this called?*," which are two questions that mean the same thing, for the name of something tells us its purpose. These are the natural and immediate questions of any explorer. A true explorer looks for purpose.

We as human beings are programmed this way. Have you ever seen someone come across a machine or item they have never seen or don't know, and not be intrigued to know its name or purpose? If you have never seen a printer in your life, would you encounter it and automatically say, "I'm going to use this printer for this and that," without any knowledge of its purpose or name. If you did, how would those who understand the purpose of the printer view you? They would think you are acting very foolishly and ignorantly. They would wonder how you are jumping to use the printer in different ways without first knowing its purpose. And in the end, you may actually break the printer without exploring it first to identify its purpose. Exploring something with the intention of knowing its purpose helps us find its purpose. If I asked you to study the design of a tool I put in front of you, the first question you will probably ask me is, "*What is this tool supposed to do?*" If I didn't tell you its purpose, you would naturally explore it to figure out what you can use it for. And if I *did* tell you its purpose, knowing the purpose of the tool will help you navigate its design. Similarly, knowing our purpose will help us navigate and understand the tools that God put within us, because we recognize that everything within us is meant to help us fulfill that purpose. And the opposite is also true: if we explored and reflected upon our magnificent inner tools and the way God fashioned us physically, psychologically, and spiritually, we would naturally know that not only there has to be a great Creator of our design, but

that God must have created us for a great purpose and we would naturally want to know what that purpose is.

So in summary, the more connected we are to our purpose, the more we will see and understand the beauty of how God designed us, and the more we will give importance to beautifully navigating that design. We will recognize how He equipped us with everything we need to navigate our way towards Him. And as we get to know ourselves and know our design, it will only remind us that everything within us is designed in such a way to help us fulfill our God-given purpose. Remember, we cannot run away from a purpose that was already programmed within us and has shaped our very makeup. Therefore, every time we go against or stray away from our existential purpose, His path, His commands, His love, His knowledge, we have to understand that we are essentially going against our very design. For purpose shapes the design, and our design serves our purpose. So, we will always struggle when we are not aligned with our purpose. Because the natural result of going against our purpose is that we do not know how to then navigate our design in accordance with that purpose. In the end, we will naturally place a burden on ourselves that we were not meant to bear. For instance, the pen was created to write. That is its purpose. If we try to use it as a hammer, it will be ruined.

Many times in our lives, we forget why we were created. We forget that within our design is a heart that was programmed to long for Him, connect to Him, to navigate its way back to the Source. We disregard God's purpose for us to fulfill our own. We neglect our purpose of submitting to our Creator and choose to submit to other things created, things that will never fulfill that longing within our heart and will always end up being of harm. We end up going against our design, placing a burden on ourselves that He never meant for us to bear. In a way, we end up using the pen as a hammer, and as a result we break or malfunction. This leads to greater misery in life.

> "*And whoever turns away from My remembrance – indeed, he will have a depressed life, and We will gather him on the Day of Resurrection blind.*" (Qur'an, 20:124)

5

It is a Journey of Love: The H.O.M.E. Method's 6 Principles of Understanding Divine Love

Through the H.O.M.E. Method, you are embarking on a journey to transform the world within you, to experience greater inner peace, and to align your mind, heart, emotions, and *nafs* in service of that which beautifies your relationship with God and with yourself. You are on a journey of coming home to yourself, a journey of gaining greater self-love and authenticity that is centered around none other but God. This is sacred and powerful work. This is the journey of what it means to *live* Islam – through mind, heart, body, and soul. This is a journey of *sacred* growth, not a kind of growth that is temporary, short lived, or in service of us solely feeling good. We want to experience a journey full of *barakah* (Divine blessings), a journey that continues to bear fruits in ways we can't imagine. We want to transform so beautifully that our actions have no choice but to reflect that inner beauty we cultivate within. We want to experience a change that allows us to experience more days in which we are not just living, but feeling alive and awakened to God, our potential, blessings, and the immense opportunity each day holds for us. We want to experience an inner transformation that allows us to move lighter in the world, in our relationships, through our experiences, and as we navigate our trials and struggles. We want a kind of transformation that makes immense room in our heart for the light, freedom, faith, trust, clarity, and beauty we want God to decorate it with. We want to transform just as powerfully as a butterfly that bravely leaves behind its cocoon, knowing that it had to shed what was familiar and comfortable in order to fly. So where do we start such a great and sacred journey after we have rooted ourselves in our existential purpose? Where do we *now* direct our heart to reap such benefits of this journey? We start with love and the Creator of love, the One who has named Himself *Al-Wadud*, the Most Loving.

The H.O.M.E. Method is rooted in the belief that we cannot grow, heal, transform mentally or emotionally, and practice our faith beautifully without love being the foundation of such a journey. We start with love because the heart withers in its absence. We start with love because we cannot hate ourselves into the growth and improvement we hope to achieve. We start with love because the heart cannot connect beautifully to God, self, and others without it. We start with love because we were created *with* love by the Most Loving. The

healing, growth, alignment and inner transformation we are seeking requires that we connect to God's love for us. It requires that we see His love for us not only in Him giving us life and purpose, but through everything we experience on our path in this world. A journey of true insight (*baseerah*) requires a deep rooting in God's love. And we cannot begin any journey without such rooting.

The H.O.M.E. Method is centered around training you to give your heart back its rightful position as leader within your being so that it may be connected to all that serves your holistic growth. To do so, the heart's nourishment must become the greatest priority. Like any leader, the heart can only lead when properly nourished, and there is no greater nourishment for the heart than love, especially a love that is rooted in the Most Loving, above all else. There is nothing more nourishing for the soul than love. And there is no love as nourishing as the one received from the One who created you, loved you first, and has reared you and cared for you with love throughout your life. The beautiful home we are trying to cultivate within cannot be built upon any other foundation other than God's love. He is the Source and Creator of all the love we witness in this world and all the love we crave to experience. As we direct our heart to Him, and let *all* that we love lead us to Him, this heart within becomes firmly rooted in the best form of love we can receive. As a result, the heart becomes nourished and decorated with the most beautiful of lights and ornaments. And as we let our longing and need for love in this world direct us to experience *Al-Wadud*, the Most Loving, He will fill our heart with a love that no creation can fill.

> "*I look everywhere for Your love —*
> *Then suddenly I am filled with it.*"
> — Rabia Al Adawiya[33]

Like a child who is walking for the first time and keeps looking back to their mother or towards their mother, we too walk this journey with the eye of our heart constantly directing and redirecting itself to our Lord. We *too* know we need God just as greatly as a child needs their mother. We too are learning to walk anew, but this time in the direction of what we were created for and in line with how God created us.

Through exploring the parent-child relationship, and throughout my training as a psychologist and work with parents and children over the years, I learned that we cannot effectively and beautifully walk our path in this world without being connected to God's immense love for us, just as a child cannot walk this earth strong, nourished, and healthy without experiencing or being connected to their parent's love. A child who is not connected to the love their

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33 Al-Adawiyya, R. (1988).

parents have for them and has not felt loved by their parents is very likely to grow up experiencing great inner conflict, and a form of self-hate towards themselves. Today, many people do not love themselves because they did not truly feel loved by their parents or early caretakers growing up. Love was not modeled, expressed, taught, or worse, it was intentionally withheld. I have counseled and provided therapy to countless people who struggled with their psychological and spiritual health because they grew up with parents who only criticized them, narcissistic parents who were verbally abusive, or emotionally unavailable parents who never properly showed their love to them. As a result, these individuals grow up to be so harsh with themselves, constantly beating themselves up, and hating themselves through life because they grew up with a parent that did not show them love. They learned to parent themselves in the same way their parents did. They speak to themselves the way their parents did. They view themselves the way they think their parents viewed them. Their inner home is void of love, and carrying a home like that day in and day out takes a toll on one's mental and emotional well-being. The heart begins to wither, to close in, to dry up, just like a plant that was neglected and left without sun and water would. There is a huge spiritual, emotional, and psychological weight one carries, when they never knew what it means to feel loved. But if not feeling loved by a parent can cause this much turmoil and imbalance in a person's life, can you imagine the kind of imbalance, turmoil, and chaos we experience when we have been living our lives disconnected from God's love for us, the One who created us *and* our parents, and has even greater love and mercy towards us than any loving mother can have for her child? As Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us: *"Allah (God) is more merciful to His servants than this mother is to her child."*[34] But unlike parents who are limited, God is unlimited, and He has an infinite supply of what we seek and need. And while there are parents who may neglect their children, God never neglects His creation. He is always near, always watchful of us, always guiding us, and is always there for us. It is *we* who forget that truth and forget our need for Him. And unfortunately, today, many people are disconnected from God's love.

We understand the power of love when it comes to the world and our relationships with others, but not when it comes to our relationship with God. We *love* love. The talk of love is everywhere from our shows to our movies and songs. When I was a teenager, I remember wondering why all the songs on the radio were about love or heartbreak, which is in essence a disconnect from love. I reflected upon this for a while, but didn't arrive at the answer till I was an adult. All I knew then was that love was something everyone wanted and valued, but as I grew older, I realized that the greatest love we can experience

34 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, 5999; *Sahīh Muslim*, 2754.

is Divine love, but many of us do not understand the value of experiencing God's love. In fact, today love is often worshiped instead of God. For many, love is a religion. It is what people obey and revolve their life around. We are constantly inundated with messages that tell us to show blind obedience to love, regardless of its form and in what direction it is expressed. But because it is a false idol, that love produces great pain and suffering in individuals and society and directs the heart away from what serves it.

For the heart to be the leader of our being, and for us to experience great inner alignment, love cannot be worshiped, only experienced. Love is the means, not the end, and not our Lord. Love is *not* our *Rabb*. It is there to direct us to our *Rabb* and everything our *Rabb* loves. The heart was made by God for God, and its greatest nourishment is His love. This is why Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us the following *dua* (supplication): *"O Allah, I ask you for your love and the love of those who love you and the deeds that will bring me your love. O Allah, make your love more beloved to me than myself and my family and even cold water."*[35]

Love is the greatest gift that God can give each of our hearts. And it is *through* love that God has created us and brought us into existence from nothing. Think about this for a moment: if God had not given you existence, you would never have been known in this world. There would be no *you* in your family, in your work, in your community. The world would not have a *you* in it. The world would be void of your face, your personality, your strengths, your smile, and the essence and beauty of who you are. God did not *need* to create you, but He gave you existence to show you His love and value for you. It is through love that God appointed parents over us to care for us in this world and why parents are encouraged to name their children the best of names. It is through love that God has sent the same message of truth from the beginning of mankind, from Adam, all the way to the seal of prophets, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), so that we are never cut off from Him and have the guidance we need to live beautiful lives and return to an even more beautiful destination: our final home in *jannah*. It is through love that God prescribed for us acts of worship so that we always have access to Him and remain connected to all that we need to thrive.

It is unfortunate, though, how many people grow up never seeing or experiencing God's love. In my work exploring psychological barriers to our spiritual growth for many years, I have found that some of the most common psychological barriers to faith – to being present with God, to experiencing nourishment and fulfillment in our acts of worship – are the thoughts and beliefs that people have about God and His love for us. Many people were

35 Sunan al-Tirmidhī, 3490.

taught about God, Islam, and faith in the absence of God's love. And when fear, hell, or consciousness of God (*taqwa*) was taught, it was often taught in the absence of love and mercy. Many people today also do not believe that God actually loves us immensely. And many believe that God's love is only associated with us going through hardships and experiencing immense pain and suffering.

As a psychologist, I know how our thoughts, beliefs, emotions, and mental associations we have about what we learn and experience play a powerful role in how we interact with all the areas of our life. This includes how we interact with God and experience our relationship with Him. But very often, we do not give importance to the role our psychology plays in how we approach our faith, our understanding of God, and how we experience our acts of worship. As a result, we often blame our lack of closeness to God and His love solely on the level of faith we have. We say things like, "*my iman (faith) is low*," "*God is displeased with me*," "*My heart is diseased*," "*I must be a bad Muslim.*" This tunnel vision we have in those moments where we blame one aspect such as the state of our heart and faith – and negate all the other pieces that play a role in our lives – only produces the greatest psychological barrier between us and God, and that is shame. Shame, and I mean toxic shame – not the kind of shame we have when we feel immense humility in front of God after disobeying Him and going against our nature (*fitrah*) – is one of *Shaytan*'s greatest psychological tactics to keep us from experiencing God's immense love and mercy for us. Toxic shame is a psychological experience in which a person feels great emotional danger, a lack of emotional safety, worthlessness, emptiness, a lack of belonging, and a feeling like they themselves are innately or permanently wrong or flawed. There is great mental and emotional harm in toxic shame, and it differs from guilt in the sense that guilt is when you feel the action you did was flawed, not *you*, whereas toxic shame is not focused on the action, but the person itself. The person, when experiencing toxic shame, defines their entire worth by the flawed action. This is the reason toxic shame is such a powerful psychological experience that often produces a distressful physiological response in the body, because it is sending the message to our entire being that we are now worthless, unlovable, not deserving of belonging, and at our core, *flawed* and less than. The body feels the impact of such harmful messaging, for everything is connected within us. How we think and feel impacts our physical body. Everything is connected. That is why it is so important that we take a step back and look at all the holistic pieces, the mental, emotional, behavioral, and spiritual pieces that play a role in our disconnect from God and His love. God knows our psychology. He knows how each person grew up. He knows how each person was taught about Islam. And that is why no two people will be judged the same, for Islam was delivered

to each person differently. Each person had a different upbringing, different parents, different experiences, different traumas, different inner strengths and challenges, different personalities, different minds, and different environments. God knows this and takes all of this into account when viewing each person's relationship with Him, so shouldn't we?

If God is our priority, and if inner alignment and holistic transformation is what we are seeking, then we as adults have to play an active role in unlearning the unhelpful thoughts and beliefs we have about God and His love for us, and that we have been carrying for so long. We need to evaluate and tackle the psychological barriers that come between us and God and the immense love He wants us to experience in this world. As Rumi said: "*Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.*"[36]

To help you do that, I want to share with you the *H.O.M.E. Method's 6 Principles of Understanding Love Through the Divine.* I have developed these principles to tackle some of the common barriers and misunderstandings I mentioned so far when it comes to experiencing God's love but also a sacred love for ourselves. In fact, I teach these principles in my Sacred Self-Love Course at The H.O.M.E. Institute because I deeply believe we cannot truly experience a nourishing and sacred love for ourselves if our very understanding of love and God's love is skewed.

The H.O.M.E. Method's 6 Principles of Understanding Love Through the Divine

Principle 1: *True Love is an experience of the Heart*

The heart is the greatest inner gift we were given by God, for it is the part within us designed to experience love, and the most powerful tool we have to connect to His love. You do not experience real love with your mind or your ego. If the ego claims to love, it is not a true or pure form of love, for the ego is motivated by self-preservation and self-importance, and true love can never exist in the presence of such motivations. So, the ego can *desire* people or things but not truly know how to love them. This can be reflective of how a narcissist experiences "love." A narcissist is ego-led, and therefore they often *desire* certain people to affirm their superiority or self-importance, but never really know how to *love* them.

We also do not experience love with our minds. The mind can think about love, and have the evidence to support why we love someone, but only the

36 Gerken, D. (2019).

heart can experience love. This truth can be seen in a person who might use their mind to reflect on the reasons why they should love someone, and actually might come up with different reasons such as "they were kind," or "they helped me in this situation or the other," but still not actually *experience* love for that person. The mind says, "this person is great, you *should* love them," but the heart does not experience love for that person. The mind cannot convince the heart to love. It can only present the heart with the information that can help it love. But only God, the Creator of love, can guide the heart to *truly* love, and only the heart itself can experience love.

Principle 2: *Our Relationship with God is Rooted in Love*

First and foremost, God created us with love. Love is the foundation of the first and most sacred relationship we have: our relationship with our Creator. As I mentioned earlier, one of the most common reasons why people have barriers to experiencing God's love is that they were taught about God in the absence of love. What this means is that they learned to worship God and perform their acts of worship without a connection to God's love for them. Many were taught to solely worship God out of fear of going to hell. So a question that comes up often is, "*How can I fear God and also love Him?*" This question points us to a great misconception about love and fear, and that is that they are opposites. Society has constantly sent us the message that love is the opposite of fear. Over the years, I myself have read self-help books and heard many motivational speakers say the phrase: "*choose love, not fear.*" This perplexed me for a long time and led me to explore this association further. The question I set out to explore further was: "*Is love the opposite of fear as these self-help gurus are constantly teaching us?*" The answer became clear to my heart as I continued to study Islam. I realized that in the Qur'an, God does not compare love with fear, that fear had its own opposite, and it wasn't love. It was *hope.*

When we look in the Qur'an, it's not fear and love that are contrasted – it is hope and fear. God doesn't draw a contrast between love and fear because fear can actually exist within the presence and context of love. That is because love is the foundation of our relationship with God. It is the foundation in which one can hope for His closeness but also fear His displeasure, or fear being disconnected from the One we love. We understand this clearly when it is applied to our human relationships. When we love another human being, it is natural to hope for their closeness and to see them happy, but at the same time, we fear seeing them displeased or being disconnected from them. Our relationship with our Creator requires the same two components: hope and fear. God tells us in the Qur'an: "*They arise from their beds and they supplicate*

*their Lord in **fear and hope**, and they spend from what We have provided them*" (32:16). Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) also didn't compare fear and love. In a *dua* (supplication), he said: "*O Allah (God), I submit my face to you and entrust my affair to you. I commit myself to you out of **hope and fear** of you.*"[37] And when describing the experience of faith and the journey of our heart towards God, Ibn Al-Qayyim says: "*The heart on its journey towards Allah (God) the Exalted is like that of a bird. Love is its head, and fear and hope are its two wings. When the head is healthy, then the two wings will fly well. When the head is cut off, the bird will die. When either of two wings is damaged, the bird becomes vulnerable to every hunter and predator.*"[38] Ibn Al-Qayyim is pointing out here that, without love, the bird cannot fly. There is no life, no movement, no opportunity for growth, if we cut ourselves off from love. But when love is present, we still cannot fly and be formidable against the harms of the world if either hope or fear is missing. We need a balance of hope and fear to move through life, to thrive, to fly, to be free and strong against the influences that seek to make our mind, body, and spirit weak, and our disconnect from God and truth great. These, amongst many other teachings in Islam taught me that love is *not* the opposite of fear, but rather, that love is the very foundation in which hope and fear naturally rise up from.

Love is the foundation of our path to God, our relationship with Him, and the roots from which hope and fear sprout. Love is the foundation of our interaction with God, whether we are hoping for His reward and closeness, or fearing His displeasure or warnings of his punishment. And while we cultivate a relationship with God that is rooted in love, we must remember that God's relationship with us, from the very beginning, was always rooted in love. Love is the foundation of our very existence but also *His* interactions with us. Everything that God blesses us with or tests us with is rooted in His love for us and in service of our growth and the greater destination He wants us all to arrive at. Everything that God allowed and forbade is rooted in His Love for us. Whether He gives us glad tidings of His rewards in the Qur'an or He warns us of His punishments, love never leaves the conversation. His love is present in the verses of heaven, and it is present in the verses of hell. Love is in His glad tidings and in His warnings. But because love and fear are often talked about as opposites, when it comes to our relationship with God, we assume that if there is fear or talk about God's warnings, then there is an absence of love. As a result, we stay away from talking about fear and do not often remind each other of God's warnings, because we think it means that love is taken out of

37 *Sahīh Muslim,* 2710.

38 *Madārij al-Sālikīn,* 1/517.

the equation. It doesn't help that fear is often talked about in a negative context and usually in opposition to love, so we feel that there is a choice to be made between fearing God and loving Him. But what if we have just been talking about fear in the wrong context? What if we stop talking about fear in the absence of love, and instead talk about it in its presence? Does that even exist?

It most definitely exists and again, we can easily see its existence when we look at our human relationships. We witness this particularly when looking at the parent-child relationship. Psychologically, the child views their parents as their whole world. They actually have an innate need for their parents to be happy with them, because to them, their parents are responsible for their inner and outer safety and security. I learned this truth even more deeply through my clinical training and through working with children extensively. I remember one particular client of mine, a 5-year-old, whose mother was complaining that he constantly lies. When I was discussing this case with my supervisor at the time, who had been in the field for decades and worked with children for many years, she explained to me that children do not understand what lying really is. She said that children do not know that lying is bad or why it is bad. All they know is that they are preserving the safety of their environment. Children know that if they tell the truth at times, their parents may become upset with them, and that makes them feel very unsafe emotionally or fear the possibility of being cut off from their parent's love. They lie to preserve that love and safety, not because they consciously know that lying is bad. This is why it is so important that parents still express their love for their child, even when they are angry at them, and focus on the flawed behavior itself without making the child feel they themselves are bad or flawed. There is a powerful way in which parents can warn a child of a consequence, or address a wrong behavior, and still make the child feel loved, and not cut off from the emotional security their parents offer. This is what God models for us so beautifully in the Qur'an. His love and mercy is present even when He addresses wrongs He wants us to avoid. This is how God beautifully interacts with us throughout the Qur'an. His warnings of punishment or consequence are never disconnected from His reminders of His mercy and closeness to us. An example of this is reflected in the following verse: "*This Book is a revelation from Allah, the All-Mighty, the All-Knowing; the Forgiver of sins, the Accepter of repentance, the Stern in retribution (or punishment), the Bountiful. There is no god but He. To Him are all destined to return*" (40:2-3). There isn't a chapter in the Qur'an that speaks solely of God's punishment or wrath, without His rewards, hope, love, and mercy ever so present on those pages as well. God never wants us to feel cut off from Him, even when He is angry with us. God never wants us to feel alone, even when we disobey Him. God never wants us to lose hope in a new page and in His mercy, even if we are drowning in mistakes. A perfect

example of this is the following verse, where God tells us in the Qur'an, "*... O My servants who have transgressed against themselves [by sinning], do not despair of the mercy of Allah. Indeed, Allah forgives all sins. Indeed, it is He who is the Forgiving, the Merciful*" (39:53).

In the psychology of learning, we understand that consequences and rewards are the basis of how children and human beings learn, and that is because hope and fear are the greatest catalysts for positive change. It is not a coincidence that God utilizes the same technique to empower us towards growth, transformation, and receiving the benefits from having a close and fulfilling relationship with Him. Our relationship with God was never meant to be built on the foundation of fear. It was designed to be built upon the foundation of love, for the ultimate purpose of our relationship with Him is to experience His love. And when we finally come to that understanding, we will see that true love naturally requires having a healthy balance between hope and fear, and that God inciting a healthy sense of hope and fear within us are in fact natural products of His love for us.

In the mother-child relationship, we can clearly see this truth. Whether a mother incites a healthy sense of hope by promising her child with a reward or incites a healthy sense of fear by placing a consequence for an action she doesn't want her child to do, both actions are a product of her love for her child. Her core motive is always to get the child to avoid doing what is harmful or to do what is beneficial, even if the child does not fully understand the benefits and harms of those actions. Her motive is always to do what is *good* for her child, and her actions are rooted in both her immense love and mercy towards her child. For instance, a mother will mandate certain actions for her child to do and not others, meaning that some actions hold greater weight, and if they are not done, will result in a consequence for the child. For example, she might mandate for her child to eat dinner and if the child doesn't, the consequence will be that the child will not get dessert. She knows that her child *needs* to eat even if the child doesn't want to. The child grudgingly sits at the table and forces himself to eat in an attempt to obey his mother's command because he *hopes* that, through his obedience to her, she becomes pleased with him, or he hopes for the reward of having dessert. But if her being pleased with him or the reward of dessert was not enough to ignite hope in him, the consequence of not having dessert will ignite fear in him. Either way, the child will come to the dinner table and eat. That is all the mother cares about. The only reason she made this action mandatory and with a consequence, is solely for the benefit of the child, not for her own benefit. She knew her child *needed* to eat, even if the child didn't see the benefit of eating. And by making it mandatory and by placing both rewards and consequences, the child will do it and receive

the benefit consistently, whether he or she does the action out of hope or fear. Love was the foundation of her inciting a healthy sense of hope by setting a reward for her child's action, and love was the foundation of her inciting a healthy sense of fear by warning him of a consequence. Now, if this is just what a *mother* does out of love, how can we think that God – the Creator of our mothers and all creation, and the One who has far greater mercy and love towards us than our own mothers – would give us glad tidings of rewards and warn us of consequences, in separation of His immense love for us?

When God makes an action mandatory and warns us of great consequences for our neglect of that action, it is because the benefit that lies for *us* within that action is great, and so the emphasis on it has to be great as well. Infact, the more beneficial the action is for us, the greater the consequence there is for neglecting it. For instance, prayer is the most important *fard* (mandate) we were commanded and it is the first we will be asked about on the day of judgment. God has emphasized prayer to the greatest degree. He has made it mandatory and the consequences for leaving it heavy. And that is because He *knows* how desperately we need it. God doesn't command anything without wisdom and without love for His creation. The benefit for us is so great that the emphasis on it *had* to be great as well, so that we can continue doing it and receive its benefits consistently. God did not put us in this world to leave us alone. He loves us and does not want us to ever feel disconnected from Him. He does not want us to handle this world alone. He wants us to always have access to Him. So, He gave us prayer. Prayer is *our* gift, and the strongest link we have to Him. Nothing He gives us is a burden unless we make it a burden by the way we choose to look at it or the way we choose to view our Creator. We need to see His love for us in everything He commands us to do, for every single one of His commands is a product of His immense love for us. And so is every single trial or test we go through.

Our tests and trials serve to increase our love for our Creator, but to also experience greater love *from* Him. This might be hard to understand, and I find that many people struggle with this. So, let us look to our human relationships to see evidence of this truth. When two people love each other and are faced with difficulties or challenges, their love only increases when they hold on to each other through the test. That is because tests either bring hearts closer or farther apart, depending on how we react to our loved one during the test. For example, if a person blames their spouse for their difficulty, it will be unlikely that the test will bring them closer. But if spouses view each other as support and that they are a team navigating the struggle together, they are more likely to grow *in* love through that test. So, how they view and turn to each other during a difficult time can increase or decrease the love they have for each other. This is one of the reasons why God tests us. He hopes the test will

make you react by turning towards Him and not away from Him. He hopes the test will urge you to hold on to Him, to bring your heart closer to Him and not close your heart off to Him. He placed the test on your path to turn you away from what could have harmed you and redirect you to the One who can most benefit you. He never placed the test there so you can face it alone. He put it there so you can face it *with* Him, together. Because it is this sacred bond during difficult times that fuels our love for our Beloved and allows it to settle more deeply in our hearts. So, if you ever feel that God is far from you, remember that He is closer to you than your own self, knows what your innermost self whispers to you, and He is closer to you than the very vein that pumps blood into your heart.[39] He is closer to you than the beating of your heart. He is closer to you than life itself. Direct your attention to this truth, and you will recognize that God never moved. You only disconnected from the place where you were meant to feel His closeness, and that is your heart. For, there might be a barrier between Him and our eyes, but He never placed one between Him and our hearts. And if there is one, we built it.

"*When My servants ask you about Me, I am near...*" (Qur'an, 2:186)

We have access to God and His love from wherever we are by just connecting to the greatest tool He has given us: our heart. Remember the story of Yunus (Jonah, ﷺ), who, when he prayed to God, he prayed from a place no human being has ever prayed. In the belly of a whale, in the dark depths of the ocean, and feeling (what I can imagine as) complete helplessness, fear, and loneliness, he made a prayer that got answered. There is so much to learn from that prayer he made, but there is also a core message here that there is no situation too difficult, no place too forgotten nor secluded, no darkness too deep, no distance (spiritual or physical) too far, that can ever come between a person's sincere heart and God. There will never be an obstacle that is too great, for He is always Greater.

Principle 3: *Knowledge Precedes Love*

While Divine love is the greatest nourishment of the heart, it cannot exist in the heart without knowledge of God. We cannot love who we do not know. Therefore, knowledge of God precedes love for Him. Our soul already knows God, for it was with Him in the world it came from, but in our human experience, we need to reconnect with that knowledge. We need to seek knowledge so that we remember Who our soul already knows. That is why increasing our knowledge of God creates peace within, for it reconnects the soul with its Creator. And it creates great inner alignment and harmony,

39 Qur'an, 50:16

for it is a great source of fuel for the heart. Knowledge of God and His truths strengthens the heart to free itself from the shackles of the *nafs*. Knowing God and the role He plays in our lives is what nourishes the heart and allows the heart to lead beautifully. To know Him is what makes the journey sweet, for it helps us experience the joy of knowing Who is always by our side and Who it is we return to to live eternally with. To know the magnificence and beauty of our Creator is where the treasures of this world lie. As we decorate our hearts with the knowledge of who God is, His attributes, and what He has taught us about Himself through the Qur'an and *sunnah*, the heart becomes illuminated with His light and filled with a great and nourishing love for Him. For one cannot know how beautiful God is and not naturally feel a great love and longing for Him.

"*...knowledge is the seed of longing...*"[40] — Imam Al-Ghazali

Principle 4: *Love is NOT Conditional Upon Perfection*

Perfection is not an ingredient of love. Perfection was never a condition that God set for you to be loved by Him or to receive blessings from Him. His love may vary in levels from one person to another, but there is always a level of love to access from God, for His love for us is ever-abundant. But many people believe that God only loves us when we are perfectly obedient, that His love for us is so black and white – that we either are in the category of people who God loves or in the category of people that God doesn't love. And this never made sense to me, especially when looking at the parent-child relationship. In my work with many parents and children, I saw how a child can engage in actions that anger the parent and that show disobedience to the parent, yet the parent's love for the child does not waver. A parent will love their child even if they do not approve of their child's actions. A parent will love their child even if they are angry at their behaviors. A healthy parent will find it impossible to completely stop loving their child. So, how can we think that God's love for us is so black and white, or so fragile that it disappears the second we are not perfect or we make a mistake? How can we think God's love is so conditional? If God's love was so conditional (as many people believe), then what condition did we have to fulfill to be created, to be given life, to be given eyes to see, ears to hear, and for the world to be so magnificently beautified for us?

"*Do you not see that Allah (God) (swt) has made what is in the heavens a and earth subservient to you and made complete to you His favours outwardly and inwardly?*" (Qur'an, 31:20)

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40 Al-Ghazali, A. (1999).

God gives His love because of *His* perfection, not ours. But many of us, due to our own experiences and upbringing, have been skewed to believe that we have to be perfect to be loved by others, and therefore have to be perfect to be loved by God. To experience love from God or others, we never have to be perfect, just truthful, authentic, and with a sincere intention to grow that is evident through our efforts and behaviors. But remember that God is unlike any human being, and oftentimes what He asks of us is far less than what human beings ask of us. To experience His love, all we have to do is go to Him as imperfect as we are, and never stop knocking on His door, for the key to this greatest of doors and this greatest of love is this: to go with awareness and acceptance of your imperfections, and not with toxic shame and judgment of them; to show up as your truest self, and not as a perfect, ideal, and inauthentic version of who you are, that God already knows isn't real; to show your vulnerability, and not your immunity; to show your need for His help, not the help of those who have no power; and to go to Him knowing that when He decides to give, it is because of who He is, not because of how "perfect" or imperfect you are.

> "*...and Allah (God) is the Free of need (or rich), while you are the needy (or poor).*" (Qur'an, 47:38)

Remember that we will always be imperfect. To expect yourself to be perfect in order to receive God's love and blessings is an illusion, for you will never arrive at perfection. But more importantly, this false belief will become a psychological barrier between you and God. If you believe that God has absolutely *zero* love for you once you make a mistake, then it will become so much harder for you to go to God in those moments when you need Him most. We should not wait to be perfect to go to God and experience His love. He never asked us to be perfect, just like a loving parent would not ask a child to be perfect. But what He *does* expect of you is to not abandon your path to Him, to keep walking towards Him with all your imperfections, to show up to what He has called you to, to be sincere, to put in the effort – and He will do the rest.

Principle 5: *Love Serves to Nourish*

The purpose of love is nourishment, and I learned this so powerfully from the *sunnah*. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), when describing being loved by his beloved wife, Khadijah (رضي الله عنها), he used the word "nourished." He said, "*I was nourished by her love.*"[41]

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41 *Sahīh Muslim*, 2435b.

Love is created by the Most Loving to nourish us. That is the purpose of love. It is designed to fuel the heart, water its growth, and suffice it in ways nothing else can. Real love has a purpose. It provides nourishment for the individual who is receiving that love. Being loved by others in a sacred way nourishes us. Loving ourselves in a sacred way should nourish us. But the love that God gives us nourishes us on a level that greatly surpasses the nourishment that any other being or ourselves can provide. When this resonates in the heart, we will learn to love ourselves and others in a way that is rooted in this Divine love. And, we won't want to love any other way.

> Nourished by the right self-love, we can be secured.
> Nourished by the right human love, we can thrive.
> Nourished by God's love, we can be freed.[42]

Principle 6: *Love Takes Work*

God loves us, but if we want that love to grow, it takes work. We are beloved to God as His creation, for He created us all with love, but not everyone is beloved to God as His servant and worshiper. That love is a special kind of love on its own, and very different from the love we receive simply being God's creation. When a servant worships God beautifully, God showers that servant with a different, deeper, and greater form of love. It is so great that He announces that love in the heavens and commands the angels to love that person as well. This is reflected in the following *hadith*, where Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) said, "*When Allah (God) loves a servant, He calls out to Jibril (Angel Gabriel) and says: 'I love so-and-so; so love him.' Then Jibril loves him. After that he (Jibril) announces to the inhabitants of heavens that Allah (God) loves so-and-so; so love him; and the inhabitants of the heavens (the angels) also love him and then make people on earth love him.*"[43]

To receive this kind of love, it takes work. Loving others and ourselves also takes work. It is a journey, not a destination. But in any relationship, we cannot take love for granted. We cannot assume that just because God created us with love, that the love between us and Him does not need to be nurtured. We understand this when it comes to our human relationships. Spouses understand that, just because they married each other due to love, does not mean that they do not need to work to keep that love alive, and to grow that love even further. But with God, we often assume that His love towards us and all its forms should be given despite our persistent lack of obedience to Him. If another human being's love deserves work, how can we expect God's love to not deserve our efforts and work?

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42 Poem by the author.

43 *Riyad as-Salihin*, 387.

True love towards God, others, and ourselves, requires consistent and sincere efforts and actions. Love, in its truest form, if experienced by our heart, has to be evident through not only our words but, most importantly, our actions and behaviors. It is not just a matter of what we claim. People will often say, "God (or faith) is in my heart and that is enough," to justify why they don't pray or obey God's commands. But if we applied this truth to our relationships with human beings or even ourselves, we would immediately see the falsehood in this claim, for we understand that when we claim to love someone or even ourselves, it should be seen in our actions. For example, if a person told their spouse what they needed from them to thrive in the relationship, and their spouse did not make any effort to change their actions, but just continued to claim they love the person, would that person truly feel loved? Probably not. Our actions and how we show up in any relationship reveals the truth of that love we claim to have for ourselves or others. For a heart that truly loves guides the limbs to reflect that love. And when our actions do not reflect what we claim, there is great harm. For example, a person can emotionally harm another if they claim to love them but show no signs of it in their actions towards them, or worse, express the complete opposite message through their actions: hate. We can also experience great inner distress if we act in ways that do not reflect love and respect for ourselves, regardless of how much we claim we have love and respect for ourselves.

But in our relationship with God, God is never impacted by our lack of effort or love. He is above that. The only person that is impacted by not following through on our claim to love God is ourselves. He loves us, but is *our* love towards Him true? In fact, we should always ask ourselves the question, *Is our claim to love God, ourselves, or others true?* And the only way to know the answer is to look at our actions and behaviors. Because if love is truly nurtured in the heart, it will gain power over the ego, and we will then see the evidence of that love on not only our tongues but through our behaviors.

> We say: "*If they love you, they will change.*"
> We believe that real love
> should override our egos
> and our discomfort towards change.
> If that is true with humans,
> it is also true with God.
> So, how will your love
> for the Greatest override your ego today?[44]

44 Poem by the author.

We also can't claim to love God without fostering a connection and longing for the *akhira* (hereafter) in our hearts, and without being concerned about securing our place in *jannah*. Because when you truly love someone, you want to be close to them and you want to be able to see the one you love, and only in *jannah* can we attain the reward of seeing God. Only in *jannah* can we attain the closest proximity to Him. So if we say we love God but are not working hard for the *akhira* (the hereafter) and trying to acquire good deeds, then we have to evaluate the "love" our tongues speak of.

> "*Your Love now is my richness and my blessing,*
> *For it purifies the Eye of my heart which is filled*
> *with dust. May You be pleased with me.*
> *This is the longing of my heart,*
> *And the source of all my happiness.*"
> — Rabia Al Adawiya[45]

45 Qevani, M. (2020).

Al-Wadud[46]

I searched for love
And saw others search for it too
We may not have defined it as love
But it was something we knew

Something we had already felt
Deep within our soul
Because how can we want
what we do not already know

We must've gotten a taste
Of what love is
or a newborn wouldn't yearn
for a mother's kiss

We came out of wombs
Already knowing love
Like a nostalgic scent of perfume
We yearned to smell it as it was

But nothing ever comes close
To that love we knew
And when we think we found it
Our longing for it only grew

It is like arriving at a mirage
With our thirst unquenched
Only to set out searching again
With hearts confused and clenched

Because that love we seek
That love our soul already knows
It was meant to be the fragrance
But we mistook it for the rose

It was created as the path
The means, but not the end
So that our soul finds its way
By following its scent

A scent the soul already knows
Because it smelled it before
When as commanded, it rose
And a promise, it swore

It knew it was love
Before it even entered the womb
Because before, it was nothing
And then it became something known

Who would give what is "nothing" life
And make it beautiful and pristine
If it wasn't out of love
And to make His love known and seen

Only the Creator of love
Would be the Creator of you and me
Only He would create and provide
But of Needs be completely free[47]

46 Translation: *The Most Loving*

47 Poem by the author.

6

It is a Journey of Sacred Authenticity (*Haqq & Sidq*): The Ten Core Principles of Truth

Truth plays a crucial role in our path to aligning ourselves. To be a great leader, the heart needs truth and cannot grow in the absence of truth. Nothing beautiful ever does. The alignment of our heart, mind, and ego requires us to live with sacredness, uprightness, sincerity, and truthfulness, essentially living with both *haqq* and *sidq* – what I define and teach as *sacred authenticity* in the H.O.M.E. Method. Sacred authenticity is the foundation of our inner alignment, the sacred love we want to have towards ourselves and others, and the foundation of our return to wholeness. In the H.O.M.E. Method, **sacred authenticity** is defined as: *the practice of prioritizing what is true and real (haqq) and not what is false (baatil), embodying honesty and truthfulness (sidq) in the way we live our life in front of God and ourselves, and aligning the inward with the outward so that our heart and being is not in conflict.*

In our world today, authenticity is a popular word. We see many people claiming to be authentic while they are doing things that aren't actually *true* to their core identity, to their *ruh*. Many people are engaging in behaviors that actually take them out of their most truthful state, their *fitrah*. Or they are viewing themselves in a way that is not in line with the truth of how God created them. This is why it is essential for us to discuss the importance of *sacred authenticity* before we embark on understanding our *psycho-spiritual system* and how God designed us inwardly.

First and foremost, sacred authenticity is not just about being truthful to oneself, but – also and more importantly – to God. It is aligning ourselves with the One who has named Himself, *Al-Haqq*, the Truth. In our world today, many people will justify doing things that are wrong or even false (*baatil*) by saying, "It is my truth." But as Muslims, the process of being truthful and living authentically does not end with ourselves, for we are not the Master, Lord, or Ultimate Authority over ourselves. We have already testified to having a Lord. We have the Most High to answer to. Right and wrong will constantly change over time, but what is right and wrong in front of God doesn't. Sacred authenticity is about connecting to our truths but, more importantly, passing those truths through a God-centered filter to see if they align with God, reminding ourselves that we are not the final authority over what we do.

If we analyze the core message of Islam, we will see that it is essentially an invitation to truth. God is inviting us to witness the truth about Him, our purpose, our existence, our design, the ways of humanity, our nature, and our journey in this world and the hereafter. Islam teaches us to prioritize truth in all our experiences. In fact, not only is authenticity a constant message in the Qur'an, but God constantly warns us of embodying its opposite. The opposite of authenticity is hypocrisy. Authenticity is when what we say and do is aligned with what we claim to believe. Hypocrisy is when what we say and do is in opposition of or conflicting with what we claim to believe. Many of us claim various things. We claim to believe this and that. But our claims are not what define what is true. This is why a key aspect of living with sacred authenticity is learning what your core beliefs and values are, a key topic I cover in a later chapter. What defines what is *true* is what we actually believe in our heart (not our mind), and what actually shows up in our actions. We can recognize our truth through how we show up to live each day.

Hypocrisy is something God warns us about because He wants us to be truthful and aligned. He does not want us to live as two beings: who we present to the world, and who we truly are in front of God. Many of us do not feel at peace, whole, and aligned because the "I" we present to the world is not the same "I" we present to God and is not the same "I" we really live with day in and day out. This is what we call being "two-faced," which is essentially what hypocrisy is. This word is often used to describe a lack of integrity and honesty with others; for example, when one compliments another, and then says something bad about them in their absence. In being two-faced, a person is presenting a truth that does not reflect the truth of their heart, which is a quality that is very displeasing to God. In fact, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) said: "*The worst people in the Sight of Allah (God) on the Day of Resurrection will be the double faced people who appear to some people with one face and to other people with another face (i.e. a hypocrite).*"[48]

Islam teaches us that dishonesty of any form, especially taking the form of being two-faced, is a great sin, and a sign of ill faith. Coincidentally, in the Western self-help world, I have seen inauthenticity being referred to as an expression of "bad faith." But we often think of being two-faced in terms of only deceiving others. Hypocrisy or inauthenticity, in fact, is not only a form of deceiving others, but above all, it is a form of deceiving ourselves. Because that is what hypocrisy and inauthenticity is: a form of great self-deception. God teaches us this in the Qur'an when He talks about the hypocrites. He says, "*Fain would they deceive Allah (God) and those who believe, but* ***they only deceive themselves****, and realize (it) not!*" (2:9).

48 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī,* 6058.

In this verse, God is referring to the hypocrites at the time of the Prophet (ﷺ) who would claim to have faith in front of the Muslims, but reflect a different truth when they are by themselves, thinking they deceived God and the Muslims. This is a great and very severe level of hypocrisy, the kind that is intentional and ill-meaning. But many people do not intend to be hypocrites, and their form of self-deception is not ill-meaning, but rather speaks to a great gap in self-awareness and knowing oneself. Regardless, the verse mentioned above still speaks to the fact that when we engage in inauthenticity or hypocrisy in any form, it is a form of self-deception. We cannot deceive God. We only deceive ourselves when we are not being truthful and living authentically.

Who we are with God when no other soul can hear one word, or see one deed, is the "I" we need to get to know. When we are more familiar with the "I" we present to the world, and not the "I" we present to the Lord of the worlds, we become more disconnected from sincerity and truth. A great way to invest in that "I" is to do deeds that only God knows about, to practice concealing our good deeds just as we would conceal our bad ones, to make sure that the deeds we do between us and God are always greater than the ones that are known to others. And with God's help, we will be a step closer to knowing our truest self and there will be no conflict between the "I" we present to God and the "I" we present to the world. They will be indistinguishable. Above all, we become more protected from meeting God thinking we have a mountain of good deeds only to find ourselves truly poor.

"*These people hid their deeds so Allah (God), the Most High hid for them that which no eye has seen, nor has occurred to a human heart.*"[49]
— Hassan Al-Basri (رحمه الله)

The Ten Core Principles of Truth

For us to understand what it means to be authentic and truthful in the most sacred way, we must first deeply understand *truth* itself through the lens of our Creator. To help you do that, I share with you ten key principles of truth that are rooted in the teachings of the Qur'an. These principles are my attempts to explore and identify the verses of "truth" and "truthfulness" (*haqq* and *sidq*) throughout the Qur'an, and the teachings of Islam in general.

Principle 1: *God Himself is Truth*

God has named Himself, *Al-Haqq* (The Truth). This is reflected in the following verses in the Qur'an:

"*So high (above all) is Allah, the Sovereign, the Truth.*" (20:114)
"*Know that Allah (alone) is the Ultimate Truth.*" (24:25)

49 *Tafsir Ibn Kathir,* (32:17).

Principle 2: *Only Truthfulness is Befitting for Al-Haqq*

Throughout the Qur'an, God not only tells us that He is the Truth, but that He is truthful and speaks the truth. Think about this for a moment. Does God need to tell us He speaks the truth? Does God need to prove anything to us? No. Absolutely not. Then, why does God affirm that He speaks the truth? It is love. It is pure love for His creation. He wants us to trust Him, because isn't that what love calls for, trust? Don't two people who love each other require that they trust each other? Don't you also want those you love to trust *you*? We understand the important role trust plays in love, so how can we not understand that He doesn't have to affirm He speaks the truth – for He is the Most High and Most Perfect – but He does this so that we can cultivate trust in Him? For trust comes before love, and we need trust to beautifully walk this journey.

"*Allah has declared the truth.*" (3:95)
"*...surely Allah's promise is (always) true.*" (10:55)
"*And Allah speaks the truth and He shows the way.*" (33:4)
"*...And whose word is more truthful than Allah's?*" (4:122)

Principle 3: *Only God is Most Worthy of Showing the Truth*

Who can be more worthy to show us truth than the One who created us? Above all, how can we depend on others more than God to show us the way?

"*Say, 'Can any of your partner-gods show the way to the Truth?' Say, 'Allah (God) shows the way to the Truth. Is someone who shows the way to the Truth more worthy to be followed, or someone who cannot find the way unless he himself is shown? What is the matter with you? How do you judge?*'" (Qur'an, 10:35)

Principle 4: *Everything God Sent to Humanity is Truth*

This is also reiterated several times in the Qur'an:

"*Verily, We have sent down to you the Book (this Quran) for mankind in truth. So whosoever accepts the guidance, it is only for his own self, and whosoever goes astray, he goes astray only for his (own) loss...*" (Qur'an, 39:41)
"*We sent down the Quran with the truth, and with the truth it has come down,...*" (Qur'an, 17:105)
"*We have brought you the Truth but most of you despise it.*" (Qur'an, 43:78)
"*And unto thee have We revealed the Scripture with the truth, confirming whatever Scripture was before it, and a watcher over it.*" (Qur'an, 5:48)

Principle 5: *God Created with Truth*

"*He is the One Who created the heavens and the earth in truth. On the Day 'of Judgment' He will say, 'Be!' And there will be! His command is truth.*" (Qur'an, 6:73)
"*Allah (God) created the heavens and the earth with truth.*" (Qur'an, 29:44)

Principle 6: *God Sent Truth to Guide*

The ultimate purpose of truth is guidance, to light the way. In fact, in the Qur'an, God associates guidance with light:

"*O People of the Book! Now Our Messenger has come to you, revealing much of what you have hidden of the Scriptures and disregarding much. There certainly has come to you from Allah (God) a light and a clear Book, through which Allah (God) guides those who seek His pleasure to the ways of peace,* ***brings them out of darkness and into light*** *by His Will, and guides them to the Straight Path.*" (Qur'an, 5:15-16)

Islam takes people from falsehood (*baatil*) to truth (*haqq*). It takes the heart from darkness to light. Because that is what truth is designed to do. Even in our world today, truth is often associated with light. We say things like "*truth will light the way.*" It is also associated with freedom. We say, "*the truth will set you free.*" We all universally understand that truth is a great gift and necessity in life, and we understand that its absence creates problems. For example, when someone engages in lying, which is the very act of hiding or altering the truth, a healthy human heart will experience guilt and a person will subsequently feel a lot of emotional struggle due to their lie. The heart knows when we disconnect from truth, and as a result becomes disturbed by that disconnect. And when we do the opposite and connect to truth – speak the truth, live by truth – the heart becomes illuminated, nourished, freer, and at peace. It isn't disturbed. The heart's light, peace, expansion, and liberation cannot be fostered when we attach to what is false and not in line with God. Truth is what frees the heart and lights the way for our entire being, in this world and the next. And truth is the ultimate guidance from God.

"*He is the One Who has sent His Messenger with (true) guidance and the religion of truth*" (Qur'an, 9:33)
"*Allah shows the way to the Truth.*" (Qur'an, 10:35)

Principle 7: *God Only Judges with the Truth*

"*Say, "Our Lord will gather us together, then He will judge between us with the truth.*" (Qur'an, 34:26)
"*Our Lord! Judge between us and our people with truth. You are the best of those who judge.*" (Qur'an, 7:89)

Principle 8: *Truth Will Always Be Victorious Over Falsehood*

Truth is like light, and darkness cannot exist in the presence of light. Once light comes, darkness vanishes. Once truth exists, falsehood also vanishes.

"*And declare, 'The truth has come and falsehood has vanished. Indeed, falsehood is bound to vanish.*" (Qur'an, 17:81)
"*Surely assumptions can in no way replace the truth.*" (Qur'an, 10:36)

According to Einstein's Theory of Special Relativity, light is the fastest thing in the universe.[50] And while darkness only exists in the absence of light, light is not dependent on the absence of anything. As it appears, darkness disappears from its path. And the speed in which light moves through its path is greater than the speed of any other entity in the universe. *Nothing* is faster than the speed of light. This is a mercy and a sign from God, and one we should deeply reflect upon. Think about this: God designed light to spread faster than anything else, especially darkness. He made light easier to experience and to receive. And He causes darkness to exist *only* when there is no light.

We all know the power of light. Light is what guides our sight. It is what inspires. It is what gives us hope. But light, as we are taught in the Qur'an, is not just physical. We are taught about spiritual light, and the power of that light. And just like physical light guides the sight of our physical eyes, spiritual light guides the sight of our spiritual eyes, the eyes of our heart. It is what allows the heart to see truth. It is what inspires the heart. It is what fills the heart with hope. It is what obliterates darkness from the heart. Because once the heart receives that light, darkness cannot exist in its presence. It has no choice but to vanish. "*Nur*," the Arabic term for light in the Qur'an, is used to signify enlightenment, truth, guidance, and a freedom from darkness. God Himself has said in the Qur'an that He is "*Nurul samawati wal ard*," the Light of the Heavens and the Earth (24:35).

This is not to say that God is the same as the light our human intellect understands, for the light we know of is a created thing and God is above and nothing like anything He creates, but He is the Creator and Source of all light, physical and spiritual. To access that light, belief in Him must fill our hearts. If we can learn to always hold onto His rope, truth and light will fill

50 Johnson-Groh, M. (2019).

our path and obliterate any falsehood and darkness in its way. And just like light in itself is the fastest moving thing that we know exists in the universe, there will be no one or nothing that will move faster towards you than God Himself, than the Creator of light, for He says in Hadith Qudsi: "*If he (my servant) comes to me walking, I go to Him at speed.*"[51] He has made it so easy to experience and receive His light. He has made it easy to receive His guidance and for our path to be lit by His truths. As we start walking towards Him, and all His truths, we will witness the power of His light. We will see how fast *Al-Nur* Himself moves towards us.

Finally, do not be deceived by how many people blindly follow falsehood in our world today. Falsehood is louder, shinier, and more popular because it always needs an audience to support its existence, while truth never needs an audience to exist, and will continue to exist even if no one supports it. So, remember that falsehood always shines because it has no light and truth is light, so it doesn't need to shine.

Principle 9: *Truth Does Not Bend To Our Desire*

This is particularly important for the times we live in, where the opposite message is being constantly promoted. We live in a time where people think truth *should* bend to their desire, essentially to their lower self (or *nafs*). And many people will attempt to change what is true to accommodate their desires. We see it all around us today, where people are changing God's words or minimizing them to fit their low-order desires and their false and skewed interpretations of reality. Attempting to bend the truth to fit our desires is increasing rapidly within our times. We see this in the way that people are trying to alter the truth to fit it into their distorted perceptions of who they are. More than ever, we are seeing people attempt to bend the truth to accommodate mental illnesses, mental distortions, and true sickness. And society is normalizing this. But truth, by default, cannot ever bend to our desires. Truth is truth and cannot be distorted no matter how many people attempt to do so. Inevitably, those who attempt to bend truth to fit their desire, destruct psychologically. Because that is the inevitable consequence of attempting to distort the truth. It destroys us. In the Qur'an, God tells us that the heavens and earth themselves would be destroyed if truth follows our desires. So, how can we think we won't negatively be impacted if we try to bend truth to accommodate our desires?

> "*Had the truth followed their desires, the heavens, the earth, and all those in them would have certainly been ruined.*" (Qur'an, 23:71)

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51 Hadith 15, 40 Hadith Qudsi.

Priniciple 10: ***We Are Required To Follow The Truth***

If God emphasized truth so significantly, it is because it is so important that we seek it, connect deeply to it, follow it, and live by it. Truth does not exist just so we can acknowledge it, but so that it is a *lived* reality that beautifies our inner and outer worlds.

> "*By the [passage of] time! Surely humanity is in 'grave' loss, except those who have faith, do good, and urge each other to the truth, and urge each other to perseverance.*" (Qur'an 103:1-3)
> "*There are some among the people of Musa who guide with the truth and establish justice accordingly.*" (Qur'an, 7:159)

These ten principles are the foundation of sacred authenticity and living truthfully. Without understanding these core principles of truth, we won't prioritize aligning ourselves with the truths that God taught us, the truth of He is, the truth of who we are, and the holistic design in which He has fashioned us. Striving to live in line with God's truths and prioritizing truth with oneself and with God is the foundation of everything else we want to achieve: growth, peace, self-love, wholeness, alignment, and success in this world and the next. In fact, in the God & Me Program, students have to first go through the phase of sacred authenticity before I teach them about wholeness and sacred self-love, and many other core concepts. And when I teach my students sacred self-love, I teach them that authenticity is one of the key ingredients and steps to experiencing a sacred love towards themselves that is rooted in their relationship with the Most Loving (*Al-Wadud*). So, as you can see, our rooting in truth is essential for the holistic growth we want to achieve.

7

An Islamic Psychological View of the Self

Throughout Islam's teachings, God gives us the knowledge we need to navigate our way to Him, to fulfill our purpose, and to live a life of meaning and peace (or *salam*) in this world. The guidance He has given us is rooted in His immense love for us. And this guidance includes the knowledge of who He is, why we are created, the nature of our path, our destination, but also *how* God designed us. For it is by knowing our design, that we can learn to access the tools we need to navigate our path beautifully and in a way that serves our purpose.

Islam's teachings provide us with a holistic understanding of the human being. Through the Qur'an and *sunnah*, God teaches us about the entities that He placed within us. He speaks to our entire design. Islam points to not only our physical and biological facets but our psychological and spiritual (psycho-spiritual) faculties as well. He does not ignore any part of us.

When we recognize that we are souls, spiritual beings – that do not belong here – we long for guidance from the One who created us and the One we return to. And that is why the greatest gift we are given in this world *is* Islam, for it is guidance from the One who Created us. Because why would we want to know who we are from anyone other than the One who created us? Would it make sense to you if someone wanted to understand and beautifully navigate a Tesla by reading a Toyota manual? Would you go to an iPhone manual to understand how to use an Android phone? Of course, you wouldn't. You would seek out the manuals made by the creators of the machine, phone, or vehicle you are trying to navigate.

Only the creator of the thing you are trying to navigate can guide you on how to perfectly understand the tools within their creation, what each tool is created for and designed to do, and how to navigate those tools beautifully so that you can utilize that machine, phone, or car in a way that allows it to function successfully and serve its purpose. Going to the wrong source of the creation you are trying to navigate only results in you causing possible harm to it. You may utilize certain tools in a way they were not designed to be used. As a result, you may burden aspects of that creation in a way that it wasn't designed to bear, and you may add stress to it that leads to its malfunction. Not interacting with something in a way that it was designed ultimately leads to its ruin, and it not fulfilling its purpose.

So then, let me ask this: *Is a car, phone, or machine more important and valuable to navigate beautifully than YOU?* Of course not. You are a far more valuable creation than any car, phone, house, or machine. You may drive a car, use a phone, live in a house, but you interact with yourself every second of your life. You are with *you* one hundred percent of the time. You can get out of your car, put your phone away, or step out of your house, but you cannot escape yourself. A car might take you from your house to work, and a phone may facilitate communication between you and another person, but *you* and all the tools God equipped you with are designed to take you through the greatest of journeys and fulfill the greatest of purposes. If it is so important to learn how to navigate a vehicle that only takes you from one location to the next, then how can it be *less* important to learn to navigate the very vehicle housing your soul and taking you on a journey from God and back to God, from the realm where your soul was created back to the realm it was designed to live in forever? How can it not be so deeply important to understand how to navigate the very creation that transcends this temporary world and all the temporary creations within it? Unlike your cars, houses, phones, and machines, you do not end in this world. Your soul is not temporary. And your Creator isn't a limited human being. Unlike the makers of phones, cars, machines, and anything you deem valuable in this world, God is the only true Creator, for only He can create out of nothing. We human beings can create beautiful things and amazing things, but only by utilizing and imitating things that were already created by God for our world. We learned to make airplanes by studying the fascinating creature of God, the bird. We learned to make the most advanced cameras by studying the impeccable human eye that God created for us to see. We learned time through the movements of the sun and the moon.

> "*It is He (God) who made the sun a shining light and the moon a derived light and determined for it phases – that you may know the number of years and account (of time). Allah (God) has not created this except in truth. He details the signs for a people who know.*" (Qur'an, 10:5)

Human makers only create such fascinating things in our world through the signs and inspiration they receive from the creation that God has placed right in front of them. But *you*, are not designed by a limited human being. Your heart, your mind, your emotions, are given to you by the Greatest of Creators, by the Greatest of Artists, by the Most Loving, the Most Powerful, and the Source of everything you need.

Throughout the Qur'an and *sunnah*, we are offered a clear and holistic understanding of our God-given design. And that is what Islamic psychology essentially points us to: a truthful understanding of the self. As mentioned earlier, Islamic psychology often translates in Arabic to "*ilm al nafs*," which

means the knowledge of the (entire) self. So what is the knowledge of the self, according to Islamic teachings? Below, I lay out the inner facets that God has taught us through the Qur'an and *sunnah*. These facets inform the H.O.M.E. Method's Psycho-Spiritual Model that I have developed and will share with you in the following chapter.

Our Psychological & Spiritual (Psycho-Spiritual) Facets Through an Islamic Psychological Lens

Below is an outline of all the entities that make up the self, according to the Qur'an and *sunnah*.

The *Ruh*

The first entity is the *ruh*, which is the Arabic word for "spirit" or "soul." What we do know about the soul is that it is the most permanent part within us, the part that transcends the human experience, the part within us that returns to its Lord, to where it was first created. Beyond this knowledge, we do not know much about the *ruh*. As God tells us in the Qur'an, "*And they ask you, (O Muhammad), about the soul. Say, 'The soul is of the affair of my Lord. And mankind have not been given of knowledge except a little.*" (17:85). What we can imply, though, from the knowledge we do have about the *ruh* is that the soul is not from this world, and therefore its nourishment can only come from the world that it came from. Just like the physical body has needs and specific nutrition requirements, the spiritual body (the *ruh*) has its own specific nutrition requirements. While the physical body requires physical food to thrive, the soul requires spiritual food to thrive. Its food is not physical. It is not worldly possessions. It is not people, places, or things. It is the spirit contained within those things. It is love, with God's love being the greatest love that the soul needs. It is connection, with a connection to God being the soul's greatest need. It is truth, with God's truths being the soul's greatest needs. The soul longs for God like a child longs for its mother. The soul thrives when it is connected to that which is aligned with God, just as a plant thrives when it is aligned with the earth it came from. The *ruh* is in essence who we are. It is not our temporary experience. It is who we always were, who we are in this world, and who we will be in the eternal world to come.

The *Qalb*

The Arabic word for "heart" in the Qur'an is *qalb*. Within Islamic teachings, the *qalb* is often referred to as the spiritual heart, which is to indicate that we are not talking about the biological heart that pumps blood to our organs. We are talking about the spiritual heart that is contained within the physical heart.

Islamic teachings highlight that there can be physical and spiritual forms of the same entity or ability, and that each form serves a different purpose. For example, the ability to see – sight itself – can take both physical and spiritual forms. In Arabic, sight is called "*basar*," and this refers to physical sight, the ability to see with our physical eyes. There is another form of sight that is recognized in Islamic teachings and that is spiritual sight (or insight), which is translated in Arabic as "*baseerah*." Islam teaches us that one can have "*basar*," but not "*baseerah*," which means that one can physically see things with their eyes but can't see certain realities with the sight (or eye) of their heart. This connects us to a great truth, which is that the heart itself has the ability to see. The heart, as God teaches us, has the ability to see truths that the eyes cannot see. God tells us in the Qur'an: "*For indeed, it is not eyes that are blinded, but blinded are the hearts which are within the chests*" (22:46).

This verse highlights how one entity or ability can have both a physical and spiritual form – how eyes can exist physically as an extension of our brains, as well as spiritually within our heart. Similarly, the body itself takes both physical and spiritual forms. We have a physical body and a spiritual body. Our physical body is the body we can see and touch, the one surrounded by skin and contains all our organs, blood, and bones. The spiritual body is our *ruh*, our spirit, that is housed within the physical body, but cannot be physically seen or touched. The *qalb*, the spiritual heart, is similar to the *ruh*, in the sense that it is housed within the physical heart, but also cannot be seen or touched, only experienced.

The (spiritual) heart, as I have come to learn through Islamic teachings, my own personal experiences, and my work with others, is the strongest tool of connection we were given from God. And it is the entity within us that impacts the health of everything else within our being. As Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) teaches us: "*There lies within the body a piece of flesh. If it is sound, the whole body is sound; and if it is corrupted, the whole body is corrupted. Verily this piece is the heart.*"[52]

It was this emphasis on the heart that I witnessed throughout the Qur'an and *sunnah* that awakened me to be reflective and question Western psychology's emphasis that the mind is the central point of our psychological health and that it is the greatest tool within us. Islam taught me that we have been neglecting what is actually the greatest tool within us, and that is our heart. And because of this neglect, we are burdening aspects of ourselves in a way that they were not designed to bear, and consequently experiencing great misalignment.

52 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, 52.

The *Aql*

The *aql* is a crucial facet within our inner world, and it means intellect and cognition. Intellect and cognition are the tools that help us think, understand, make sense, and interpret what we witness, interact with, and absorb from the world. In Western psychology, cognition is defined as all the mental processes that our brain engages in from collecting information, processing that information, interpreting that information, organizing that information into categories called schemas, and then storing that information. Intellect and cognition helps us process and understand our experiences in this world.

If you notice, though, I labeled this section "the *aql*," and not "the brain." That is because in the Qur'an, intellect and cognition is a tool and function that is not specific to the rational brain, what we call our mind. In fact, in Islamic teachings, the ability to process and understand is also a function of the heart, not just our brain. And there are many examples of this in the Qur'an, such as, "*So have they not traveled through the earth and have hearts by which to **reason** (or intellectualize) and ears by which to hear? ...*" (22:46). In this verse, the heart is associated with the verb form of *aql*, which is *yaqiloon*, the ability to intellectualize, reason, and utilize wisdom. Other verses that reflect the cognitive abilities of the heart are:

"*... They have hearts with which they do not **understand**.*" (7:179)
"*Will they not **contemplate** the Qur'an? Do they have locks on their hearts?*" (47:24)

These verses point to us that the heart (and not just the brain) has the ability to reflect, contemplate, see, and understand. Both the brain and the heart have the ability of intellect and cognition, but they are simply experienced differently. When I connected to this truth, I started experimenting with it and reflecting on it more deeply. I started paying attention to moments in which my heart understood something my mind didn't. I started recognizing when having information about something in my mind did not translate to my heart having an experience with that information. I started noticing how, even though I had certain knowledge – or lack of – about a situation, it was my heart that helped me process, see, and understand things that my brain could not help me with. These experiences played a huge role in the development of the Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method and its emphasis on prioritizing the heart's intelligence in a world that valued, above all else, the intelligence of the rational brain.

Emotions

In the Qur'an, God speaks to various emotional experiences we have as human beings, and He speaks to them both directly and indirectly. God speaks

to emotions such as happiness, sadness, grief, fear, hope, and anger, which are reflected in the following verses:

"*And his eyes turned white out of **grief**...*" (Qur'an, 12:84)
"*(They are) those who donate in prosperity and adversity, control their **anger**, and pardon others. And Allah loves the good-doers.*" (3:134)
"*...on them shall be no **fear**, nor shall they grieve.*" (2:38)
"*Some of them will be wretched, and some **happy**.*" (11:105)

Through many verses of the Qur'an, God speaks to our emotional needs, our longing for love, connection, mercy, and security. Emotions are one of God's beautiful creations. They are a gift designed to help us navigate our inner world. They are universal experiences that help us connect to ourselves but also to each other, and above all, to our Creator. They serve us and help us function individually but also collectively and socially.

The *Nafs*

The *nafs* is an Arabic word that is the literal translation for the "self" or our being. In the Qur'an, the word *nafs* is utilized to refer to the entire self, our being, sometimes to the soul, and sometimes to the lower self. Oftentimes, when used by Islamic teachers, scholars, and Muslims, there is a common understanding that it is being used in reference to our lower self, the part of ourselves that contains the lower drives.

Islam teaches us that the self has 3 different levels or stages. The lowest level or the first stage is called "*an-nafs al-'ammārah bil su'*," which means "the self that incites us to evil." This type of self is mentioned in the Qur'an in the story of Prophet Yusuf: "*Yet I claim not that my nafs was innocent: Verily the nafs incites to evil*" (12:53). This is what is known as the primitive stage of the *nafs* on our spiritual path. At this stage, the self has not yet spiritually matured and elevated, and calls us to the acts that are not in service of our soul and its path to God. It is driven by our ego, desires, and worldly drives (i.e, physical, sexual, egotistical, etc). This ego-containing, lower self, prioritizes comfort and pleasures and avoids the discomforts necessary for growth and inner freedom. Essentially, it is the part of ourselves that is centered around the ego, self-importance, and is attached to this human world and not attached to the spiritual world our soul came from. Living from this stage of the self or not actively working to elevate oneself beyond this stage leads to a lack of inner peace, tranquility, growth, and alignment.

The middle level or second stage is called "*nafs al lawamma*," which means the "self-critical or reproaching self." This is the self that is attempting to not give in to the desires of the ego. It is the self that is putting in the effort to elevate beyond the lower self. This is the stage in which one attains greater awareness

or consciousness about their actions and behaviors, and is not mindlessly led by the lower self or ego. This stage of the self is mentioned in the Qur'an. In fact, God swears by it. He says, "*...and by the self-reproaching nafs*" (75:2).

The highest level is called "*nafs al mutma'inah,*" which means the "tranquil self." The tranquil self is the self that is aligned with its *fitrah*, God's truths, and is freed from being led by lower-order desires. You can say that the *nafs al mutma'inah* is the self that is aligned with the soul. In fact, sometimes scholars refer to the *nafs* as the soul, which perplexed me at times, but makes sense to me when it is associated with this level of the *nafs*. The soul (*ruh*), as mentioned before, is not from this world, and when we reach the level of *nafs al mutma'inah*, we long to return to the world our soul came from. And it is *nafs al mutma'inah*, that God welcomes back beautifully. This is exemplified in the following verse: "*Oh Tranquil Soul (nafs al mutma'inah)! Return unto your Lord pleased with him and He pleased with you. Enter amongst My servants and enter into My gardens*" (Qur'an, 27-30).

These are the 3 main stages that Islamic scholars in the 15th century and even much earlier, have already identified (from the Qur'an and *sunnah*) to be key stages of the self. When I started studying Western psychology and learned of Freud's 3 stages of the psyche that he developed in 1923, I couldn't help but wonder if he was influenced by the Islamic understanding of the self. "Psyche" is often used as another word for the self in the psychology world. And although his 3 stages of the psyche are so different in many ways from Islam's 3 stages of the self, I found that there were elements that overlapped.

Freud broke down the personality into three structures: the *id*, *ego*, and *superego*. Looking at the self from an Islamic psychological lens, I disagreed with several aspects of his breakdown of the psyche and personality. Freud defines the id as the part of us that is present at birth and is driven by life and death instincts. The id, according to Freud, functions in line with what he calls the *pleasure principle*. The infant, being led by the id, seeks pleasure, which means it seeks instant gratification of all its instinctual needs. And it is the role of the parent to meet the needs of the id within the infant. Freud then says that the ego develops at about six months of age, and is driven by the *reality principle*. As this ego develops, the child is now more aware of reality, and as he or she continues to grow, the ego plays a role in delaying the gratification of the id and utilizes more rational thinking that meets the reality of the situation. The ego tries to facilitate the conflict between the needs of the id and the reality in the world. The final part of Freud's personality structure is the superego. The superego develops around 4 or 5 years old and it reflects the internalization of external values and standards presented to the child by his or her parents, caretakers, or society. Freud says that the ego tries to facilitate not only the conflict between the instinctual needs of the id and the reality it witnesses in

the world, but it also is facilitating the conflict between the id, reality, and the superego.

The lower self (or *nafs*) identified within Islamic teachings, can be slightly compared to Freud's id only in the small fact that the lower *nafs*, like the id, is driven by immediate gratification, instinctual needs, pleasure, and comfort. The middle *nafs* or the *nafs al lawamma* can be compared to what Freud defined as the ego, only in the sense that it is the stage in which we start to reproach ourselves, say no to the lower *nafs*, and attempt to delay its gratification. The highest stage, *nafs al mutma'inah*, can be compared to Freud's superego concept only in the sense that the higher *nafs*, similar to the superego, attempts to align with higher ideals; except, for the *nafs al mutma'inah*, it's not people or society that it looks to, but God's standards. Outside of this, Freud's teachings are highly attached to a sexual context, and he explains much of behavior, even infant behavior, through various sexual stages, which is very disturbing and was not accepted by many psychiatrists and psychologists who came after him.

The three stages of the *nafs* identified within Islamic teachings show us that we have lower-order needs and higher-order needs: the lower-order needs are what the *nafs al-'ammārah bil su'* (the lower self) is driven by, and the higher-order needs are what the *nafs al mutma'inah* (the higher self) is driven by. The middle self, *nafs al lawamma*, is in between, trying to mediate the conflict between the needs of the lower *nafs* and the higher *nafs*. Ibn Al-Qayyim explained these 3 stages beautifully when he said: "*The Nafs is a single entity, although its state may change: from the Nafs al-Ammara, to the Nafs al-Lawwama, to the Nafs al-Mutma`inna, which is the final aim of perfection (or excellence). It has been said that the Nafs al-Lawwama (the self-critical self) is the one, which cannot rest in any one state. It often changes, remembers and forgets, submits and evades, loves and hates, rejoices and becomes sad, accepts and rejects, obeys and rebels. Nafs al-Lawwama is also the Nafs of the believer... It has also been mentioned that the Nafs blames itself on the Day of Qiyamah (the day of judgment) – for every one blames himself for his actions, either his bad deeds, if he was one who had many wrong actions, or for his shortcomings, if he was one who did good deeds. All of this is accurate.*"[53]

It is amazing that our Creator gave us such guidance about the self several hundred years ago, that only in the last century did Western psychologists attempt to theorize and structure. For example, when it comes to the understanding of needs and differentiating between lower order and higher order needs, it was in 1943, that the well-known *Hierarchy of Needs* was developed by Abraham Maslow. But it was limited because it stopped at the self, with self-actualization as the top tier. It wasn't until Maslow was nearing

53 Al-Jawziyyah (2020).

his death that he came to the conclusion that self-actualization cannot be the highest level of needs, and that we need to go higher and beyond the self. He called this higher need "self transcendence," which means elevating beyond the self. He compared this phase to those who have the transcendental experience of meditating. Through an Islamic lens, we can see clearly what he was grasping at. He was reaching for the soul and its needs. He was realizing that the *nafs*, and its *donia* (worldy) needs cannot be the end and highest tier. We have to go beyond the lower *nafs* and give the *ruh* what it needs for us to experience true peace and fulfill our purpose. Because that is what a *need* means at its core. Needs provide purpose. From a psychological perspective, a need is defined as a psychological experience or characteristic that stimulates or motivates a being to take action toward a goal, providing purpose and direction to behavior. Only when we attempt to align ourselves with the needs of the *nafs al mutma'inah* (our higher *nafs* that is aligned with our ruh and its needs), can we truly fulfill the great purpose we are created for.

Although scholars have recognized that there are many other stages or types of the self, the 3 stages mentioned are the main types of the self that are recognized within Islamic teachings. For the sake of this book and staying in line with the vision of keeping things simple and practical, in the H.O.M.E. Method's Psycho-Spiritual Model presented to you in Chapter 9, we will only focus on these main levels of the *self*, specifically the lower self (*an-nafs al-'ammārah bil su'*), which I refer to in my model simply as the *nafs* or ego, and the higher self (*nafs al mutma'inah*), which I use interchangeably with the *ruh*, because it is the elevated self that aligns with our soul and its needs and *fitrah*. So essentially, the H.O.M.E. Method teaches that when we elevate ourselves to embody the attributes of a tranquil *nafs* (*nafs al mutma'inah*), we are essentially living from the most sacred, higher-vibrational, and truthful place: our souls.

The reason for this simplicity is because, through my own studies and work, I have found that we can get way too caught up in theoretical knowledge without bridging it with our lives and translating it into a simple and practical understanding that can beautify our actions and life. For years, I attempted to understand these complex theoretical explanations of the self and break them down so that I can myself understand them on a practical level that I can interact with day to day. This played a crucial part of my journey to developing the H.O.M.E. Method.

The entities of the self I shared with you so far (i.e, the *ruh*, heart, and *nafs*) are the entities recognized within Islamic teachings that help us understand who we are and our design. From this Islamic psychological understanding of the self, I have developed the Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method's

Psycho-Spiritual Model. My model takes all the entities that you have just learned and simplifies them enough for you to easily understand them, their role in your life, and how to view and interact with them.

Please understand that, while the H.O.M.E. Method and Model is rooted in Islam's understanding of the self, it is simply one humble approach to psychological and spiritual wellness. In every field, experts have attempted to make sense of the knowledge in that field, and create approaches and models that can help people better conceptualize and understand that field as well as apply it to their lives. Even in the field of *Fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence), we have the examples of different imams who all had different approaches, but all their approaches were still in line with the *aqeedah* (Islamic creed). In fact, some of the imams even differed with each other, but still benefited from the perspective of the other. The field of psychology in the West also consists of this. Psychology is relatively a young science in the West, and all the Western influencers within the field all had different approaches to and attempts in understanding the self.

The modern Islamic psychology field is an emerging field, and my H.O.M.E. Method is just one approach and theory that is developed through an Islamic lens, and approaches our psychological and spiritual struggles in its own unique way. The creation of the H.O.M.E. Model was my attempt to simplify the complex, rich, deep and theoretical understanding of the self within Islamic teachings and bridge them with psychological teachings to help you gain greater awareness of the powerful tools within you, and how to better navigate them towards greater spiritual, mental, and emotional wellness. And it is my deepest belief, from witnessing the immense power of it in my own life and the lives of others, that it can (God willing) play a powerful role in your life as well.

8

The Psychological & Spiritual Harms of Not Leading From the Heart

Whenever we go against the purpose of anything, that very thing becomes abused. Today, the mind is more abused than ever because we do not treat it in accordance with the purpose it is created for. The heart is being abused because we have not truly understood the sacred and powerful purpose it serves within our being. The ego is more inflated than ever, because we gave it a role within our being that God did not create it for. As a result the functions of each of these facets within us – our cognition, emotions, and behaviors – also have become misaligned and misdirected.

There are many psychological and spiritual harms that result from us not giving the heart its rightful place as leader of our being. In this chapter, I share with you some of these great harms that I discovered over the years through my own personal journey, through providing therapy to clients, and through teaching and mentoring students.

The Worship of the Self

Today, the worship of the self is one of the greatest consequences and harms of not leading from the heart. The worship of the self is when we place ourselves as our highest value, and is one of the greatest religions of our time. This is rooted in a disconnect from the heart. When the heart is not the lead, one cannot experience the longing in the heart for the only One worthy of worship, and that is God. When we are disconnected from this longing within, we start living from other places, lower facets within us that are constantly prioritizing instant gratification, what always makes us feel good, or only what is comprehendible. The more we feed this *nafs*, and constantly chase its every whim and desire, the more we drown out the voice of our heart telling us it longs for God. The heart was programmed to know God is its highest value, but with our *nafs* or mind as the lead, we become susceptible to making anything other than God our highest value. Today, the chosen highest value for many people is themselves. This involves placing any aspect or function of ourselves as the most superior thing in our life. We have the potential to worship our minds, our emotions, or our *nafs* or ego and its desires. Through all of the influences we face in the world, from the *nafs*-driven culture on social

media to the unhelpful "popular psychology" messages that many people are inundated with every day, people are being encouraged slowly but powerfully – oftentimes without realizing – to make themselves the lord of themselves. Many people actually don't even know it is happening, because recognizing this truth requires the heart, as it is the greater eye and decipherer of truth within us. When the heart is not the lead, we do not prioritize its connection to God, and as a result, we cut it off from the Truth, *Al-Haqq*, Himself.

Today, the false idols are everywhere – from fame to wealth, people, career, money – and all false idols are rooted in making the lower self and its desires our highest value. The heart knows its only true Idol is God and that it needs God to be able to distinguish between truth and falsehood. Only when the nourishment of the heart is prioritized, can the heart be awakened to see truth *as* truth and falsehood *as* falsehood. But if we don't prioritize the heart day in and day out, we ourselves become disconnected from truth and our ability to see when something false is being presented to us as truth. This is what is happening today. Many people accept falsehood just because it's popular or accepted by many people. But a heart linked to God knows when something is true even if few follow it. When God is our highest value, He guides us to see the illusions that the devil (Satan) and his followers package and wrap as "reality" or "truth" to us every day.

> "*O people, Allah's (God's) promise is the truth; therefore, do not be distracted by this lowly life. Do not be diverted from Allah (God) by mere illusions.*" (Qur'an, 35:5)

One of the greatest tactics of the devil is to give you something that is inwardly ugly but outwardly beautiful, so that you absorb the inward harm that you do not see, while being deceived to think you are benefiting from the outward beauty you visibly see. The music and media of today are perfect examples of this. Today, for example, one of the greatest ways people (especially the youth) are being negatively impacted is through music. They are drawn in by the catchy tune to absorb the inward harm of the ugly lyrics and messages that infiltrate the mind, heart, and entire being. A person falls into a sort of trance as they connect with the tune, not realizing how that song (its lyrics and possibly even the tune itself) is impacting their thoughts, emotions, and perceptions. They become like the people in the time of Musa, drawn in by the outward magic (or *sihr*) of the sorcerers, not realizing that it is inwardly false. Because that is what magic is: it is falsehood masked with the illusion of truth. This truth is clearly reflected in the Qur'an, when God teaches us the story of Musa and the sorcerers.[54] God tells us, "*Then suddenly it **appeared** to Musa,*

54 Qur'an, 20:65-70.

on account of their magic, as if their ropes and staffs were running" (20:66). The word "appeared" – or *yukhailu* in Arabic – signifies illusion. In the following verses, God then tells Musa that these magicians brought nothing but only a scheme in which there is no good within it.[55] Here God is showing us how deception works, how someone can present to us something that *appears* real, but inwardly is false and has no good in it.

Today, we may not be facing the sorcerers in a field as Musa did, but we are facing deception every day on social media, online, in our world. Media and all its forms, from music, news, to shows and movies, is the *sihr* of our time. While it can be used for good, of course, it often isn't. It is used to deceive. People are constantly being drawn in by beautiful outward messages and appearances that satisfy the *nafs*'s drive to feel good while our entire being becomes harmed by the inward falsehood and ugliness. Food is another example of how we are being deceived to consume what is not good for us. In our world today, the worst foods for us inwardly usually have the best taste as well as packaging outwardly. And because of this, we are drawn in and say we love "junk food," despite the very obvious truth presented in the name itself, which is that we are eating "junk." Even the very wording of "junk" doesn't hinder us because the taste is enticing and the outward appearance looks too good. A package of Oreos looks more beautiful to us than a piece of broccoli, but as we know, their inward value is significantly different. When the short-lived "feel-good" taste of junk food is over, all we are left with is the longer-term inward effects of what we ate. This is similar to how the devil works. He wraps longer-term harm with outward beauty and very temporary and fleeting pleasure. And the evil he sells us is always obscured by an outer, less obvious harm. Whether it's a catchy beat to dilute the horrible lyrics, or the beautiful packaging and lighthearted presentation of a show or movie that distracts you from the harmful content, he will always present things that are bad for our souls with the packaging that we find appealing.

That is because the *nafs* has no regard for inward value as long as it feels good, is secure, and asserts its self-importance. The heart, on the other hand, only feels good, secure, and safe when its greatest nourishment is God and all that He prescribed for it, even if temporarily it knows it might bring us discomfort. So the satanic (or evil and harmful) influences in our world seek to minimize the heart so they can speak to our *nafs* and its lowly desires. Amongst these lowly desires, there is one in particular that is very powerful and often chased – and that is self-importance.

The *nafs* wants to always assert its superiority and importance over others. This is one of the lowly desires of the human being, and why human beings

55 Qur'an, 20:70.

are inclined to arrogance. The *nafs*, or this ego-containing part of ourselves, is always driven to secure its place in this world, while the soul (our *ruh*) is driven to secure its place in the higher world that is its home. Unlike the *ruh* that never dies, the *nafs* dies. Only our higher self transcends this temporary world, whereas our *nafs* is made for this world and dies in this world when the physical body dies. As God tells us in the Qur'an, "*Every nafs will taste death. And We test you (O humanity) with good and evil as a trial, then to Us you will (all) be returned*" (21:35).

In this lower world, we have this lower self to battle. This is what differentiates us from angels who did not choose free will. They chose full submission to God. They do not know anything other than wanting to be aligned with God 24/7. But we chose free will, and entered this lower world for a time. And in this lower world, there is no perfection. There is great beauty but also great struggle, or what Islam calls in Arabic "*jihad*." *Jihad* literally means to struggle, as this world is full of struggle, but the greatest and most noble of struggles is to struggle in the service of God and all the good He has invited us to. In Islam, the greatest struggle is "*jihad al nafs*," which is the struggle to go against our lower self (or *nafs*). This is the hardest struggle but also the most worthwhile struggle we can partake in, as it brings us holistic benefits that are beyond measure.

"*Never have I dealt with anything more difficult than my own self.*"
— Imam Al-Ghazali

Self-Oppression & Self-Victimization

When we work to lead from the heart (and not the *nafs*), and to align our inner world with how God created it to function, we simultaneously are accepting what is good for us, for nothing that God calls us to is for anything except our own benefit. The opposite is also true: if we choose to not work to align our inner world with God, we are also simultaneously choosing harm and an oppression or abuse of our own selves.

In our world today, we do not talk about self-oppression or self-abuse as much as we talk about external abuse and oppression. But like many things, there is an external form and an internal form. Many of the self-help messaging out there today prioritizes external forms of change, focusing on tackling outside sources of oppression or abuse while ignoring all the ways we abuse, harm, and oppress ourselves. That is because many messages today speak to the *nafs*, not the heart, and the *nafs* doesn't want to hear anything that makes it bear the discomfort of accountability and being responsible for change, even if it is true. This is why many people today struggle with self-victimization, where they stay stuck in unhealthy emotional and behavioral cycles due to playing the

role of the victim in various areas in their life. A person who always plays the role of the victim has a very hard time accepting responsibility for their own shortcomings, tests, and challenges. This applies to those who live their lives thinking that everything they go through in life has no relationship to them or areas in their life they can work on. And this leads to great powerlessness, because the focus of self-victimization is on external factors such as outside circumstances or people we can't control.

Through everything we go through in life, we always have the opportunity to examine the role we play in a situation or the role we play in how we can get ourselves out of that situation. In essence, we can choose to practice self-accountability and personal responsibility, instead of self-victimization. This does not always mean that every difficulty or test we go through is *our* fault, but rather, it means that we are willing to assess the role we play, and if we discover that we have no fault in the matter, we are *still* choosing to focus on the role and power we have to grow through that difficulty, overcome that difficulty, or get ourselves out of a situation that does not serve us if we have the capacity to do so. Through cultivating a mindset and *heartset* of self-accountability and personal responsibility, we will find that instead of experiencing great powerlessness over our lives, we will feel greater power within, because our focus and energy will be driected towards what we *can* control, not what we can't control. And this is a great way to live and one that offers us an extraordinary return on a spritiual, mental, and emotional level. While self-victimization depletes our energy, self-accountability only increases our energy and preserves our energy for what truly matters.

Self-accountability is what we see exemplified throughout the teachings of Islam, especially through the lives of the prophets. A perfect example is the story of Yunus (Jonah). When Yunus was swallowed by the whale, his direct response was not "why is this happening to me?", or "whose fault is this?" He didn't say "I am a prophet of God, how could this happen to me?" Immediately, Yunus examined himself and the role he played in his situation. He did not place blame outside of himself, not even on the whale itself. He did not engage in self-victimization. He made the powerful prayer (*dua*) taught to us in the Qur'an: "*There is no God except You. Glorified Be You! Truly, I have been of the wrongdoers* (21:87). In response to this *dua*, God saved Yunus from the belly of the whale. We learn from this that there is great power in turning inward, taking responsiblity, and surrendering ourselves to God, especially in moments where we find ourselves in great difficulty. But if we lead from our *nafs,* our go-to reaction to any difficulty or test will always be to blame others or fixate on external factors we can't control, and we will never be able to see the great opportunities that God places infront of us to be the means to our growth, transformation, and spiritual elevation.

You see, it is easier for the *nafs* to blame something outwardly than something inwardly. It is easier to disconnect from the role we play in our own struggles than to face them, and a lot of modern-day teachings promote the *nafs*'s escape from responsibility. People are being told to cut someone off when they feel triggered – or immediately label someone as toxic in their life when that person agitates them – but are not often told to assess all the factors contributing to their trigger or to take responsibility for healing the inner wounds underlying those triggers. A similar messaging exists when it comes to the discussions on boundaries. People are constantly being told to prioritize external boundaries, but not internal boundaries. We are encouraged to say no to others, but rarely encouraged to say no to our own *nafs*. But just as there is value in building the muscle of saying no to others when they present to us something that does not align with our beliefs, values, or capacity, there is immense value – if not greater value – in also building the strength to say no to ourselves when our *nafs* presents to us something that does not align with our beliefs, values, and our heart's connection with God.

We are constantly encouraged indirectly and directly to escape our own discomforts, agitations, and only accept what feels good and comfortable. But doing this only coddles the *nafs*, and when the *nafs* is coddled, its voice becomes louder within our being. Its drives and attachments increase. It becomes like a spoiled child that is used to getting its way and throwing tantrums when it doesn't. As a result, we will find ourselves gradually developing lower and lower tolerance for anything that does not immediately gratify us and comfort us. This is true abuse of our entire self, for by aggressively avoiding discomfort, we deprive ourselves of true growth, healing, elevation, and peace. Think about this: if every time a child felt uncomfortable with a task or situation, the parent immediately removes that discomfort – by fixing the situation, completing that task for the child, or giving the child a toy or some ice cream to feel good – that parent is not doing what is in service of the child. And let's say a parent consistently deprives a child of crucial and necessary opportunities to grow, flourish, or have their needs (not wants) met, we may call that neglect or abuse. It is the same with ourselves. It is a form of neglect, oppression, and abuse when we consistently deny ourselves the opportunity to grow, flourish, and meet our needs, in order to serve the *nafs*'s drive for comfort.

This is the harm of leading from the *nafs*. It causes us to abuse ourselves and, as a result, never really grow into who God created us to be. Self-abuse impacts us not only spiritually, but mentally and emotionally as well, and I see the impact of it in my work as a therapist. It may not be a popular opinion, but

I believe that while there are many factors that can contribute to a declining state of psycho-spiritual health, self-oppression is a great factor that we often

overlook. That is because when we abuse or neglect facets within us, we become misaligned.

It is very easy to identify an outside source of oppression, but we can often be blinded from seeing the oppression we impose upon ourselves. But what if we are the oppressors? What do we do when we imprison our own heart, depriving it from its needs, fuel, and nourishment? What about the ways we contribute to the imprisonment (not the freedom) of our own souls? You see, freedom is not confined solely to our physical state. Many have lived in this world physically free but are trapped within the chains of their own mind and *nafs*. And there are many who are physically confined yet have hearts that are far more liberated than those who are physically free.

Our hearts are the strongest tool we have to connect to our Creator. It is the part of us in which we were commanded to take care of and ensure that it is sound before it is returned to its Maker. The part of us that, if set right, our entire being becomes set right. The part of us, that if purified, can be the strongest catalyst for the change we make within ourselves and in the world. This most valuable part of our being is suffering from a great kind of oppression. And the truth is, its oppression contributes to the external and collective oppression that is happening in the world, that we often focus more on than our inner self-oppression, not seeing that they are connected. Until we realize that the oppression we inflict upon our own hearts and souls has an impact on the collective condition of humanity, we will not actually play a role in the health of the external world and its freedom from oppression and harm. As God tells us in the Qur'an, "*Verily, Allah (God) does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves*" (13:11). In addition, our own self-oppression and disconnect from our heart's growth and needs only increases our desensitization to the suffering of our fellow humans. We will continue to live our lives in cocoons thinking we are separate from all the horrors we see on the news every day, and that is because a disconnect from self only leads to a disconnect from others. We as humanity are one body, one collective being, and each day we do not take care of our heart and the inner world it is supposed to lead beautifully, we are allowing the rest of our "body" to suffer and be oppressed as well.

> "*The parable of the believers in their affection, mercy, and compassion for each other is that of a body. When any limb aches, the whole body reacts with sleeplessness and fever.*"[56] — Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ)

56 *Sahīh Muslim*, 2586a.

Save Me From My *Nafs*

I often ask God
to save me from my *nafs*
Because my concern
is not others getting in the way.
But what I fear most
is that I am in my own way.
I fear being blinded
from seeing the barriers
that I build up.
I fear not noticing
when my ego creeps up.
I fear a heart
that cannot see truth
And a mind
that has information
but is of no use.
I fear being comfortable
with a few deeds
while to sincerity
I pay no heed.
I fear minimizing
my weaknesses
while they quietly hold me back
I fear that I will neglect
working on what I lack.
I fear a heart
that loves what He hates
and hates what He loves.
I fear that I will forget
my purpose, my home,
where my soul is from.
But above all, what I fear most
is that my soul is oppressed
And I am the oppressor.
So I continue to ask God
To save me from myself.[57]

Increased Psychological Struggles & Disorders

Due to influences of postmodernism and secularism, our skewed understanding of mental health, and our minimization of religion and spirituality in the world we live in, many people were influenced to lead from their mind and their *nafs*. As a result, they have burdened those facets within them in a way that they were not designed to bear, and we see the impact of this in the mental health world. Today, more than ever, mental illness is becoming more prevalent across the U.S. In a 2020 comparative study and report done on mental illness in the U.S. in relation to other countries, it was identified that, "*The United States has some of the worst mental health-related outcomes, including the highest suicide rate and second-highest drug-related death rate.*"[58] In my own work as a therapist, I can say that just in the last couple of years, I have seen a rise in disorders and mental health challenges than I have ever before. In particular, I have seen quite a significant rise in OCD, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. And while there are many factors that contribute to mental

57 Poem by the author.

58 Tikkanen, R. et al. (2020).

health disorders that psychological research recognizes – such as genetics, environment, trauma, behaviors, early childhood relational struggles with caregivers – Western psychology hardly recognizes the role of spirituality (or lack of) in the mental health crisis of our world today.

Let's take the increasing and prevalent struggle of anxiety disorders – and by Anxiety Disorder, I am not referring to typical or non-pathological anxiety that is naturally experienced in life. Today, the word "anxiety" is thrown around without a real psychological understanding of what it is. Many people view all anxiety as harmful and this is partly due to the messaging on anxiety, often taught by people who are not clinically trained. Unfortunately, due to social media and the growing lack of regard for knowledge and truth, we have many people teaching others about anxiety, trauma, and many disorders, without the necessary education and most importantly the training and experience. And many people are being harmed by this because they are receiving false knowledge that impacts their ability to accurately cope well with the psychological health challenges they are facing.

As a psychologist I know that not all anxiety is pathological or harmful. In fact in psychology, we recognize that anxiety and stress can actually be helpful to the human being. I also know that we need to start approaching anxiety as a whole with a focus on the heart, not just the mind. After working with many people who struggle with anxiety and seeing how the H.O.M.E. Method's focus on the heart can tremendously help them. I developed and taught my "Anxiety & Piety Course" in 2019, on how to navigate anxiety through the H.O.M.E. Method. I wanted people to understand the natural place that anxiety has in our lives and what it has to offer us, but also how we can navigate it for better spiritual and emotional health. In my course, I teach students that anxiety is a spectrum with varying levels, ranging from typical or normal anxiety that is a natural part of our human experience, to greater levels of anxiety that start to impede our functioning.

Anxiety is a natural part of our human experience. God tells us in the Qur'an: "*Indeed, mankind was created anxious*" (70:19). Anxiousness or typical anxiety is a trait within us that serves as the potential for both good and bad. Without this typical anxiety, we would not move forward. We as mankind are driven by needs, and anxiety creates the discomfort that propels us to strive towards a specific need. But if we are led by the *nafs*, we won't see what anxiety is pointing us towards, because our priority will be to immediately seek comfort, not growth. When the *nafs* is the lead, the immediate goal becomes to get rid of or suppress this anxiety by any means possible, instead of actually facing it, learning from it, and coping through it. Whether you resort to food, drinking, excessive shopping, the *nafs*'s wants will push you to cope by escaping the

discomfort and agitation of anxiety, while the heart needs you to cope *through* it and *with* the anxiety, not without it. I believe this is why anxiety is increasing for many people, and why anxiety that naturally accompanies experiences and situations we face in life that are uncertain or scary, is progressing to chronic anxiety that is triggered by any experience or situation, even ones that are not inherently unsafe or fear-provoking. We are becoming programmed to escape any anxiety or fear we experience, and anything escaped cannot be healed or benefited from. In fact, what we escape grows. What we avoid will try harder to get our attention. What we deny does not simply go away; it continues to show up in our behaviors. As we attempt to avoid anxiety, anxiety progresses to a level that is uncontrollable and we begin to perceive things and situations that are not actual threats *as* threats. In fact, even when it comes to disorders rooted in significant fear like phobias and OCD, the treatment approach involves the client facing their fear, not avoiding it.

Anxiety is also rooted in fear, particularly fear and worry about uncertainty. There are many situations in our human experience that are naturally going to provoke fear because we are always living in uncertainty. Everything beyond this very moment is uncertain. We face uncertainty every day, for we are not promised a breath past the one we just had, a day past the one we just lived, or any of the blessings we have to stay past today. This is why anxiety is a natural part of our human experience, because there are actual threats to our *nafs*'s comfort and certainty every day. But today, many people are experiencing anxiety that has progressed beyond the typical anxiety. People who are diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) have a very difficult time controlling the level of anxiety they experience. Their anxiety is triggered in the face of situations or experiences that do not necessarily bring a threat to the self, but rather they *perceive* it as a threat. If the mind is the lead, we will be led by its false belief that something is a threat when it isn't. This is especially true if there is a history of trauma. And if we are led by the *nafs*, we will perceive anything that goes against our comfort as a threat. We won't be able to decipher a real threat from a false threat, and the perceived threats increase. More so, the mind will be at the mercy of the *nafs*, being bullied to overthink and overwork itself to find a solution to the *nafs*'s discomfort. But if we lead from the heart, we will be more able to decipher between what is a real threat and what isn't. More importantly, even if in the moment the heart isn't able to do so, the heart will be able to better face the anxiety, hold a space for it, direct it to God and helpful outlets.

Like anxiety, OCD is becoming more and more prevalent. And many people struggle to cope with it, because it involves facing fear, and sitting with the fear that comes up when they perceive a harm in their environment or experience

intrusive and distressing thoughts about themselves, others, or their world. And again, while there are several factors that contribute to a person developing a mental health disorder, a factor that is often negated and minimized is the role of the heart in helping the mind. Over the years, I helped many clients (with the help of God) to cope with anxiety and OCD by helping them not give their mind the role of leadership of their being, and instead lead from their greater intellect, the heart.

OCD is a disorder characterized by recurring, intrusive or unwanted thoughts, ideas or sensations (obsessions). In one's attempt to immediately remove the intrusive thoughts, a person will immediately feel driven to engage in a compulsion or a repetitive action. For example, if a person experiences intrusive thoughts surrounding contamination, they feel driven to immediately wash their hands, change their clothes, or repeat *wudu* (ablution before prayer). Other common repetitive behaviors are checking on things like the stove or the door being locked, or actions within their mind such as counting. You might be reading this and say to yourself, "*Well I check on the stove repeatedly sometimes or I check the door more than once at times to make sure it is locked – does that count as OCD?*" I approach OCD like I approach anxiety, and that is there is a spectrum. In fact, I view many mental health challenges as being on a spectrum, where they range from typical experiences to an actual disorder that can be mild, moderate or severe. We all can experience intrusive thoughts that are a natural part of the human experience. In fact, we are taught in Islam about *waswasa*, the whisperings of *Shaytan* (Satan), which can lead us to having thoughts that are unwanted, unhealthy, and can potentially cause us distress or keep us from growing spiritually, personally, and from walking towards God. Years ago, I met a *shaykh* who told me that he has an *ijaza* (license) in *ruqyah* (spiritual healing) and worked with many people over the years who were afflicted by extreme *waswasa*, *sihr* (magic), *jinn* possession, and the evil eye. In learning more about his work, he told me that he started studying *ruqyah* after his teacher in Iraq had a dream that Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) told him to give him (the *shaykh* I am speaking to) an *ijaza* in *ruqyah*. I was intrigued by his sacred journey and started to ask him questions about his line of work. When I asked him about *waswasa*, he said something that stood out to me, which is that "*everybody experiences waswasa.*"

I learned this truth from working with many people over the years. *Waswasa* is a constant in our life because Shaytan will continue to be an obstacle on our path till the day we die. In fact it was through exploring the concept of *waswasa* in 2013 that helped me deeply understand, even more so, why we shouldn't lead from our minds, and the great necessity for accessing the greater intelligence and power of our hearts. I started paying attention to the *waswasa*

I would have about myself or my relationship with God. For example, prior to going on my first *umrah* trip, I started having all these negative thoughts that came out of nowhere – about being unworthy of going, that maybe God won't invite me there – and this increased my stress and anxiety about the trip. When I told my teacher this prior to our trip, he said this is from Shaytan, for Shaytan sees you are about to do something so pleasing to God and will try to discourage you. Shaytan will always be standing there to discourage us, especially when we are about to go do something of great value on our spiritual path. Shaytan's *waswasa* of making you doubt yourself is not going to be as strong when you are far from God, wasting your time, or about to do something that is displeasing to God. Shaytan's *waswasa* will be the strongest when you are striving in the path of God. This is a truth that we learned in the *seerah*, when the companions went to the Prophet (ﷺ) to complain of intrusive thoughts (*waswasa*) they were having that they couldn't even speak of. The Prophet (ﷺ) responded by telling them, "*this is (a sign) of clear faith (or iman).*"[59]

Shaytan works harder when he sees a person guided by his or her faith. He will stand in the way of our path to God in this world and our greatest acts of worship. And this is precisely what He told God He will do after he blamed God for his own disobedience to Him. This is reflected in the following verse from the Qur'an: "*(Satan) said, 'So, since You caused me to be misguided, indeed I will definitely sit (i.e., in ambush) for them (i.e, mankind) on Your straight Path*" (7:16). The key point here in this verse is not just that Shaytan promised to stand in our way but it is where he told God he will be an obstacle for us. He specifically says "Your straight path." This verse shows us that not only is Shaytan acknowledging that there is a straight path that God created for us to walk, but that the straight path is precisely where he will position himself. His primary goal is to stand in the way of those who are choosing God's path, not those who aren't. This is why I believe many people get *waswasa* around prayer and *wudu* (the pre-prayer cleansing ritual or ablution).

Prayer is the central and greatest act of worship that keeps us on the straight path. It is in every standing (*rak'ah*) of prayer that we recite *surat al fatiha* (Chapter 1 of the Qur'an titled "The Opening") which contains the following verses: "*Guide us along the straight path, the path of those You have blessed—not those You are displeased with, or those who are astray*" (1:6-7). Our prayers, these five most important appointments we have with God each day, remind us of the sacred path we were created to walk in this world, and they are the strongest link we have to God throughout our day. Therefore, Shaytan will work the hardest to stand in the way of us maximizing our prayer. Infact, I have worked with many people who experience their worst intrusive thoughts about God

59 *Sahīh Ibn Hibbān*, 149.

and themselves *during* prayer. One woman I spoke to told me that her intrusive thoughts stopped completely when she stopped praying, which showed her that Shaytan's whispers are strong only when she has a strong link to God.

Shaytan's greatest form of *waswasa* is to get us to doubt ourselves, our truths, our intentions, our reality, and God's acceptance of our deeds. This is why for many people, their *waswasa* is also centered around *wudu*, for *wudu* is an essential prerequisite to our prayers. If our *wudu* is not valid, our prayers become invalid. *Wudu*, which is often referred to as ablution, is the spiritual practice of physical purification that prepares us holistically (mind, body, and soul) for standing in front of God. Muslims care greatly about the validity and quality of their prayers, and Shaytan tries to attack this very sacred area by getting many people to doubt the validity of their *wudu*. But it is important to understand that it is normal to experience intrusive thoughts (or *waswasa*) of doubt about our *wudu* and its validity, even if there is no real evidence that our *wudu* was invalidated. And this is precisely why Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us to ignore doubts we have about our *wudu*. This is reflected in a hadith, where a companion asked Prophet Muhammd (ﷺ) about *"a person who imagined to have passed wind during the prayer."* Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) responded by saying, *"He should not leave his prayers unless he hears sound or smells something."*[60] In this *hadith*, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) is teaching us to only act upon certainty, not doubt, which is a helpful approach therapists take when treating someone who struggles with any intrusive and unhelpful thoughts that are significantly impeding their healthy function. We try to help them focus on what is certain about a situation, and differentiate certainty between what is imagined, false, and has no evidence to support it. In fact, we often characterize OCD as a disorder of great self-doubt, and so helping a client trust themselves and what is true over what is doubtful is a crucial part of the journey. But unlike the struggles of OCD, *waswasa* is a natural or expected aspect of our human experience. We all experience it. And God and His messenger (ﷺ) taught us about Shaytan so that we understand what to expect on our path. Shaytan will always present illusions and false realities to keep people in a state of fear and doubt, for fear and doubt are emotional experiences that significantly consume our mental and emotional energy, and deplete us of the attention and energy we need to give to what God promised and what is actually *true* and helpful to us.

> *"Satan only makes them (false) promises and deludes them with (empty) hopes. Truly Satan promises them nothing but delusion."* (Qur'an, 4:120)
> *"Surely Satan is an enemy to you, so take him as an enemy. He only invites his followers to become inmates of the Blaze."* (Qur'an, 35:6)

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60 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, 137.

But while *waswasa* is a natural part of our human experience, the problem arises when typical intrusive thoughts, *waswasa*, or typical repetitive behaviors we can engage in from time to time (like checking the stove twice), causes a level of distress that disrupts our healthy day-to-day functioning. This is the experience of someone with OCD. In fact, to diagnose someone with OCD, it is not just a matter of identifying that they are experiencing intrusive thoughts or *waswasa* from time to time. For a person to be diagnosed with OCD, their intrusive thoughts and subsequent behaviors have to impair their daily functioning. Their unwanted and intrusive thoughts are persistent and aggressive, and their attachment to their repetitive behaviors become more concrete. The rigidity of the repetitive behavior is the compulsive attempt to soothe the fear that arises from the perceived threat they are experiencing. It becomes harder for them to identify what is an actual threat and what isn't, and not immediately engaging in the compulsion or repetitive behavior often causes significant distress for the person and is often attached to a specific fear of something bad happening to themselves or their loved ones if they do not engage in that compulsion. For example, a person who struggles with OCD might say, "I have to shower and change all my clothes after touching the doorknob, because if I have germs on me, I will contaminate my home and pass on germs to my roomates," or "I need to repeat this phrase 3 times or else something bad will happen to a loved one."

The struggle of people with OCD is a very difficult one and can't just be simply written off or explained as *waswasa*. People who struggle with this disorder have a very hard time redirecting their thoughts and stopping themselves from engaging in their repetitive behaviors. The disorder itself can be a result of different factors, such as a history of trauma or genetics, and has its own therapy treatments – such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP) – but what is often overlooked when approaching the treatment of OCD is the powerful role of the heart and the unhealthy role we give the mind.

You see, when the mind is given the position of leader of our being, then we perceive every thought we have (intrusive or not, *waswasa* or not) to be true. The mind becomes our authority and we start to believe everything it gives us, and then we feel and act accordingly. The heart becomes the servant and prisoner of our mind, and we become stuck in a mental loop of all our thoughts. So when it gives us a distressful thought and we believe it is true, we consequently experience distressing emotions in reaction to those thoughts, which then drive us to engage in behaviors that attempt to remove the emotional distress (i.e. intense fear). Emotions and our behaviors are also functions of the mind. The thoughts we have impact our emotions, which in

turn impact our behaviors. This is a truth that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy affirms. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, one of the main approaches utilized by therapists to treat many psychological challenges and disorders, focuses on the power of our thoughts on our emotions and behaviors, and therefore works to help people change their thoughts and beliefs that are driving distressing emotions and unhealthy behaviors.

And while the mind is powerful and does impact our emotions and behaviors, it is not the final authority on what is true, and it is a tool we can learn to navigate instead of letting it navigate us. Through the H.O.M.E Method – when approaching my work with Muslims who struggle with OCD or intrusive thoughts (*waswasa*) – I make sure to teach them about the role of the mind and that while it is powerful, it is not their Lord; it is not the leader or the entity within them with the final say. I take this approach, because when the mind is given the leadership position, many people experience great fear towards what their mind brings them, as if their mind is a tyrant ruler they are at the mercy of. They are constantly scanning their minds for threats to their safety. And they think every thought or inclination their mind gives them is a command – that if they do not follow, will create harmful consequences for them. They believe that every thought their mind experiences defines who they are or what they actually will do. So, I make sure to work with clients to lessen the immense power they give to every thought to define them, their worth, and their actions. And I teach them how to utilize the mind in the way it was designed, as the servant of the rightful leader within their being, and that is their heart. When we can access the greater intelligence and power of the heart – and serve it beautifully – our dependance on the mind becomes more balanced, and in the end, we experience less mental and emotional stress.

The H.O.M.E. Method does not claim to heal any disorder, but what it does is offers a holistic understanding of our design that can help reduce the severity and impact of the symptoms of disorders such as OCD and anxiety, and play a preventative role in certain mental health challenges and psycho-spiritual harms from developing or progressing. This happens through giving each of our inner entities its rightful role and not burdening any of the entities with a role it was not designed to bear.

Addictions, Entitlement, & Imbalance

When we lead from the *nafs*, comfort (and not our holistic growth and well-being), becomes our greatest priority. Today, especially in the West, we are more comfort-driven than ever. We are increasingly attached to that which is easier, more accessible, and *faster*. The time between us identifying we have a desire for something and *fulfilling* that desire is becoming shorter and shorter.

We can crave a specific food, and within less than an hour, have someone knocking on our door to deliver it. When things break, we immediately look for the new instead of being patient with fixing what is broken. When we finish watching one show, there is always another one for us to start. There is always some "newness" ready and available for us to absorb, so we can get our next dopamine fix without waiting too long. We are constantly trying to chase the highest comfort, but worst of all, many people have now developed a sense of entitlement towards having constant comfort, which then leads to people experiencing emotional agitation and distress in the face of the slightest discomfort. We feel entitled to things always being easy: short lines at the grocery store, no delays in receiving our packages, people always immediately responding to our texts and calls, immediate accommodations for our every emotional trigger, and that the world should bend to our desires. We do not realize how leading from our lower self (or *nafs*), and our great efforts to constantly secure its comfort and accommodate its entitlement, is actually creating more spiritual, mental, emotional, and social problems in our life and world.

One of the greatest addictions of the *nafs* is dopamine. Dopamine is an important neurotransmitter that is often referred to as the "feel-good hormone." Neurotransmitters are released by our neurons (nerve cells in our brain) and are responsible for sending messages throughout our nervous system. Dopamine is the neurotransmitter that is released when we engage in an action that either brings us pleasure or benefit, and it sends the message that what we just did is "good," and we should repeat this action in the future.[61] This is why a dopamine fix can be utilized for us or against us. And this depends on what we are leading with, our *nafs* (or lower self) that is driven by *pleasure*, or our heart that is driven by *benefit* and what serves our higher self. If we are led by our *nafs*, then we will be at the mercy of our *nafs*'s definition of what is "good." But if we lead from the heart, our heart depends on God and His truths to determine what is good or not. Therefore, depending on what is leading us, dopamine can be a great catalyst for positive change, or it can be the reason we remain stuck in cycles of unhealthy habits that only *feel* good temporarily, but are not actually *good* for us. Because while the effects of dopamine can be great to experience and can provide us with a burst of motivation to change and do what benefits us, this burst is a short-lived experience that, *if not acted upon*, produces no benefit for us beyond it. And this is what is happening in our world today. People are becoming satisfied with just feeling good and not following through with actual actions. And this results in a constant chase of the next dopamine fix.

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61 Berridge, K. C., & Kringelbach, M. L. (2015).

In today's world, people are more than ever addicted to the dopamine rush. And everybody's drug of choice is different. It may not be an illegal drug like cocaine which produces an enormous release of dopamine in the brain, but it may still be something of great harm to you. Today, many people's drug of choice is food, shopping, social media, people, fame, money, fashion, and of course, luxury and comfort. And while these "drugs" may not produce the same dopamine spike levels as cocaine, the harms of being addicted to them is still significant. Today, many of us are constantly looking for a dopamine fix by always checking our phones, chasing the next stimulus on social media as we watch video after video, buying something new every time we feel like it or see a catchy ad, or just chasing "newness" and distractions so that we are never bored.

And as a result, our addiction to constant comfort, instant gratification, and pleasure, is resulting in excessive dopamine production in our body, but what many people do not realize is that excessive dopamine in the body actually creates greater psychological issues that seep into our spiritual and social health as well. Excessive dopamine production has been associated with poor impulse control, increased aggression, addictions, and several mental health challenges. This in turn is affecting us socially because people now have lesser patience and tolerance towards others. Also, attachment to comfort and pleasure is making people more secluded than ever. Today, people are more attached to their excessive comfort within their homes over human connection, community, and serving others. As our comforts increase, our fences become higher, and we forget our need to be connected to the world and be active participants in it. And we see this in our society today. People are lonelier than ever and more isolated than ever. They have the latest phones, advanced technology, the huge TVs, the ease, and the comforts of their homes, but their holistic well-being is not being nurtured. And that is because constant comfort causes the *nafs* to lead, and when the *nafs* is the lead, it cuts off the heart from what it needs to be nourished, and when the heart is not nourished, the rest of our being cannot thrive.

I learned a lot about the harms of excessive comfort from my travels, especially to countries that are not as developed as the U.S. I have visited countries where people live without many of the comforts we have in the West, but yet live a life of great balance, peace, and joy, that many people in the West are deprived of. They have less, and things do not come so easily or fast, but often times, the discomfort of the *nafs*, brings great comfort to the heart. Because when the *nafs* is starved, the heart has an opportunity to connect to and benefit from what truly matters. I remember a particular trip in which I experienced this truth. I was visiting Egypt one summer, and if you have ever

been to Egypt, you know that it is so beautiful but filled with great discomfort. The transportation system is very unruly and disorganized, and not everything we have in the West is as readily available or made easy, but what you see all around you is its people exuding thankfulness and great appreciation. I felt people were more present with others and valued connection over just being "connected." People asked about each other and, more importantly, showed up through their *actions* for each other, not just words. Witnessing this reminded me of a woman who once told me that, although she was born and raised in the U.S., she prefers living in Egypt, because she gets more support as a mother than she ever does in the U.S. In Egypt, I saw the true meaning of "it takes a village to raise a child." And I believe it's our attachment to comfort and constantly feeding into our *nafs*'s desires that prevents us from cultivating that "village" experience in our communities, and truly being there for others. When the *nafs* is always placed first and as our lead, there will naturally be a lack of *ithaar*, which is selflessness, a value greatly emphasized in Islam, where you have concern for others and actively look out for the needs of others. Unfortunately, though, in our "*you do you*," and "*me, myself, and I*" culture, many people view *ithaar* as a weakness or somehow analogous to self-neglect, but it isn't. Loving others and prioritizing our needs doesn't have to exist in the absence of love and care for ourselves. But today, many people are programmed to think holistic health is about *always* choosing themselves first, and as a result, there is a lack of balance embodied, where showing up for others and putting the needs of others first at times, too, is becoming a lost value and practice. This is the harm of blindly following popular self-help messages that are *nafs*-centered without filtering them through a God-centered lens that serves our higher self. The world we live in is constantly influencing us to fuel our lower self, and put its comfort first, without us even realizing at times, for these messages are not always obvious, and are often presented in the name of "boundaries," or "self-love." But in the end, what many don't realize is that prioritizing their lower-self drives and excessive comforts is in fact what is depriving them from the things that truly serve their holistic well-being.

And so, while there is nothing wrong with wanting comfort or enjoying comforts, anything out of balance creates a problem. And imbalance is created when the *nafs* is the lead, for if you give it the leadership position, it will have no limits. It is like giving your child access to the junk food drawer. They won't know when to stop until you guide them. And this is why we have to lead from the heart, for it is the heart that controls and guides the desires of the *nafs*. It is what tells it to pause before chasing the next comfort or dopamine fix. It is what overrides the desires of the *nafs* with the needs of our higher self. And only then, when the *nafs* is deprived, for the sake of the nourishment of

our higher self, do we truly grow holistically and feel a greater sense of peace and alignment.

Intellectualization of Healing & Growth

One of the greatest harms of leading from the mind or *nafs*, and not from the heart, is that we approach healing in a way that does not serve us. And one of those ways is the over-intellectualizing of our healing. Today, many people are driven to feeding their mind over feeding their heart. They have become satisfied with simply knowing information, and not doing much with that information. With social media, the internet, and how immensely easy it is to gather information, many people have been deceived to think that simply knowing something or being aware of something is the answer to their problems.

As a psychologist, I can tell you that self-awareness and knowledge is not the only factor that contributes to your healing, growth, and actual changes in your life. In fact, many people stay stuck and do not actually heal because they think self-awareness is enough, and they are simply satisfied with knowing they have an issue, and "*why*" they have that issue. Over the years, I have sat with many people who can tell me exactly what is wrong in their lives, why they have this or that struggle or challenge, and what they need to do to fix it, yet could not experience actual peace, growth, or positive changes in their life.

When we lead from the mind and give it such great authority and power over anything else, we become content with just having information in our mind. In this process, we neglect how the heart and the rest of our being is interacting with that information.

On my own journey of healing and growth, I realized at one point that I was making the mistake of intellectualizing my struggles and pain, and it was actually keeping me from the growth I needed. I knew how to immediately explain the reasons for different problems in my life, and this gave me the illusion that I was doing something about it, but I wasn't. This is what over-intellectualization and living from our mind does. It gives us the false impression that we are changing when we aren't. We are just simply rationalizing the problem, but not actually doing anything to actually fix it. And often times, we do this to avoid feeling the pain or difficult emotions that we need to face to actually make a positive change. As a result, we keep the *nafs* very comfortable.

So, I started assessing how much of what I actually know has impacted my heart, and how much of that information has actually been *felt*, applied, and interacted with on a deep level, so that I may see the fruits of it not only in my heart, but in my actions and life. I started giving more value to what my heart benefited from and what was *applied*, over what was simply known.

I learned that even though I might acquire knowledge about something, I do not truly understand it until I attempt to apply it in my life or God puts me through an experience that is relevant to that knowledge. I believe that is when we truly learn: when knowledge can be tasted and felt; when it can be utilized and applied; and when we can interact with it in a way that our mind did not even comprehend we could.

Experience is the bridge between what we absorb and what we actually benefit from. It is the space where we feel and experience what our mind knows, where we internalize what was once external, where information in the mind becomes knowledge in the heart, and where we truly taste the sweetness of knowing. That is the beauty of God allowing us to go through varying experiences and even tests throughout our lives. He is creating a process for true knowledge, for truth to be felt and experienced by our heart, and for anything else that was false to be filtered out.

When I started The H.O.M.E. Institute and started teaching courses, I made sure that I emphasized the same truth with my students. In fact, many of the exercises I intentionally place in each course are designed to teach students the importance of translating information in the mind *to* knowledge in the heart and true transformation in their behaviors and actions.

I had a student once who, upon finishing Phase 1 in the God & Me Program, was so excited to tell me how much my videos in that module felt so good to watch and how much she loved them. I told her that it is great that the videos impacted her so positively, and then I proceeded to ask her about the exercises that I intentionally developed and placed in the module to allow for students to more deeply interact and apply the knowledge they gain in the videos. She said she didn't do any of the exercises and that she felt it was enough of a benefit that she watched the videos. After hearing this, I asked her to restart the module and this time to make sure she doesn't skip any steps, and complete each exercise fully. I explained to her how she is robbing herself of great transformation and change by leaving the exercises and only watching the videos. I shared with her the role of the *nafs* on the learning journey and how the *nafs* does not like us to sit with knowledge or even apply it, because it delays its comfort or obliterates it completely. I also emphasized the great benefit of leading from the heart when we learn and prioritizing the nourishment of our heart over just gathering information in our mind. The *nafs* plays a key role in why we become satisfied with simply just having information. Having information gives us the illusion that we are changing, but without actual action, we do not get to actually see changes in our lives. When we learn empowering things, it can feel really good. But when it comes time to apply those empowering truths in our lives, it can get really

uncomfortable pretty fast. It is easy (and even fun) to learn something new, but it is harder (and often *not* fun) to change an actual behavior.

This was a student who told me that she was always addicted to learning new information. She was very attached to "knowing." We discussed this attachment and how it doesn't serve her if her heart is lagging behind, not benefitting from the information she is gaining. The reason many people spend so much of their life continuously gathering more information and not doing anything with it, is that every time we learn something new, dopamine is released into the body. The *nafs* loves this, of course, for dopamine is the *nafs*'s best friend, and the *nafs* is very attached to constantly chasing the next dopamine rush. After we learn something new, the temporary dopamine rush passes, and many people struggle to face the discomfort that will arise from the *nafs* when they start to *apply* that information, which doesn't involve giving it another dopamine rush, but instead usually involves saying *no* to the *nafs*, delaying its gratification, or rising above its desires. The *nafs* hates discomfort, hates changes that don't immediately gratify it or satisfy it, and it hates anything that delays its desires and comfort. But this is what true transformation calls for: the *nafs* to be uncomfortable. In fact, if the *nafs* is always comfortable, you can bet that you are not growing, healing, or transforming.

The student was responsive to my feedback and said she will start over and make sure she completes all exercises this time. When she completed the module again – this time completing all the exercises – she came back to me and said that she was so happy I had her start over and do the exercises. She explained how she thought she benefited just by watching the videos, but the benefit she experienced in her life was on a whole different level after she actually completed the exercises and applied what she learned in her life. She began to share actual improvements she saw in her day-to-day life, behaviors, and actions that she would not have arrived at had she just been satisfied with simply knowing the information I shared with her in the videos.

This is the power of leading from the heart. We stop giving so much value to having information in our minds, and give greater value to having knowledge in our hearts that motivates changed behavior. We start valuing the quality of information, not the quantity. We stop attaching our worth to how much we know, but start defining ourselves by how much of what we know has beautified what we *do*. We start prioritizing how that knowledge is beautifying what matters: our character, actions, deeds, behaviors, and day-to-day functioning and interactions. This is the purpose of true knowledge, which is to beautify what it touches. But many times, we learn something that moves our heart, but then never give ourselves a chance to be beautified and transformed by that knowledge, because no action followed. These are beautiful windows to

growth that we often miss. We forget that if God moved our heart, it is so that we can move our limbs.

There is a reason why Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us that "*Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim.*"[62] Seeking knowledge is what opens the mind and allows it to receive the truth it needs to serve the heart. Only when the heart is properly nourished and served by that knowledge can the limbs move to act accordingly. The companions understood the power of knowledge so deeply, for they were not satisfied with just knowing. The companions were known to learn a few verses of the Qur'an at a time, and not learn new verses until they truly understood those verses and connected them to their actions or deeds. It was reported that they would say, "*We learned sacred knowledge and action together.*"[63] They preserved the necessary link between knowledge and action. They respected the sacredness of knowledge. They understood its value and power in their lives, and knew that respect for knowledge meant that they valued its application into their lives, not just its presence in their mind.

Today, with the inundation of information from every angle, we have unfortunately as a society lost great value for knowledge. Knowledge is no longer viewed for what it is: a beautification of our own hearts first. Rather, knowledge is often viewed as something you use or abuse to get ahead, to compete with others, to make money, or to define our worth by it. This is why plagiarism and unethical sharing of knowledge is on the rise. People have lost such a respect for knowledge that they prioritize regurgitating it out to the world, while neglecting to assess its truth and whether they are presenting it truthfully (and not deceptively), and while neglecting to give oneself time to be benefited by the knowledge they gain first before they immediately share it with others (oftentimes within seconds or minutes online).

Only when we seek knowledge for the right reasons — for the sake of God and our own heart's growth — do we actually very deeply internalize the knowledge we gain and in turn transform our actions and lives. And it is through that process of authentically seeking to make changes in our *own* lives first that then allows us to powerfully help others transform theirs. We can't beautifully teach or impact others with what our hearts have not first received or come to know. It is not a coincidence that the first word revealed from the Qur'an was "*Read*" (*Iqra'*).[64] God tells us to read before He tells us that He has taught us by the pen. He says: "*Read: In the Name of your Lord who created*" and a few verses after, He says, "*He who taught by the pen. Taught*

62 *Sunan Ibn Majah*, 224.

63 *Musnad Ahmad*, 23482 (Hasan Al-Arna'ut).

64 Qur'an, 96:1

man what he never knew" (Qur'an, 96:1-5). Through this non-coincidental order of God's words, He teaches us that receiving knowledge comes before outputting knowledge. This is because we cannot produce anything if we have gained nothing. We cannot teach what we have not first truly learned. And it is only when the light of knowledge has reached us and we have understood what it means to "read," and benefit from what we learn does He then tell us the means in which we relay that benefit and light to others: the pen. The pen signifies the sharing of knowledge. But while God commands us to read, He does not command us to write. The command is in reference to receiving knowledge, not outputting knowledge. Islam of course teaches and encourages that we share beneficial knowledge with others. But the command when it comes to "reading" emphasizes the greater importance of seeking knowledge and how enough it is for us to just be powerfully transformed by the knowledge we seek. For when the heart truly benefits from knowledge, even if we do not intentionally share that knowledge with others, that knowledge becomes exemplified through our behavior, actions, character, and interactions with everyone we encounter. That in itself beautifies our lives and the world more powerfully than us verbally sharing what we know.

What I find beautiful about these verses, too, is that God says that He taught us the use of the pen. He did not say that He taught us by the way of writing. Writing is not the only way to give back to the world and benefit others. We use the pen to write, draw and create. The pen is what we use to transfer a thought in our mind to a reality in our world. We use the pen to draw and write our ideas, steps, goals, designs, and expressions that later may become projects we work on in the privacy of our homes, books we write, beautiful buildings we design, inspiring art we create, businesses we form, and services that powerfully benefit the lives of individuals, families, communities, and humanity as a whole. He taught us the use of the pen, so that after we gain knowledge, we all have the opportunity to use what we know to give back and contribute to the spaces, circles, families, and world we exist in. This leaves me in awe of God's love and mercy for us. He never leaves anyone out. He does not limit us. He gives us the tool (the pen) and the opportunity to use it in so many beautiful ways.

On our journey to renewing, aligning ourselves, and healing and growing, the most important truth we can't forget is that our actions need to be *impacted* and *transformed* by the knowledge we gain, even if it is a few pieces of knowledge at a time. We cannot just simply be satisfied with being aware or knowing what needs to change. Even in the work of healing, it is not enough for a person to know their symptoms, contributing factors to their mental health challenges, or to deeply know which traumas contribute to their current-day struggles. Healing and true growth requires a person to *feel* and emotionally

interact with the pain associated with their struggles, not just intellectualize or talk about that pain. Many times, when someone is struggling to heal, they often don't realize how much they avoid feeling their pain. It is easier to talk about trauma symptoms than to actually face the pain and wound of trauma. I witnessed this many times when working with clients' resistance to treatment. Resistance to treatment can be at times reflected in a person's attachment to talking or listing their problems but not allowing themselves to face their pain.

In the healing process, feeling poorly at times is a natural part of the journey. Feeling pain, discomfort, agitation, are signs that one is facing what is necessary to face, not just what feels good to face. But if one chooses to always stay in their mind or lead from their *nafs*, constantly comforting oneself with what they know or that they have "self-awareness," they will never get to experience the true power of healing. As Rumi beautifully teaches us, "*The wound is where the light enters you.*"[65] This truth applies to both physical wounds and emotional wounds. For a physical wound to properly heal, the doctor will often probe it to examine it. Afterwards, the doctor will have to properly cleanse it. The probing might hurt, the cleansing might sting, but that is the only way healing can take place. One can sit and tell the doctor all the knowledge they have about the wound, why they got it, and how they got it, but until one actually sits through the pain of exploring and cleansing the wound, healing cannot take place. It is the same with emotional wounds, which can be even more painful than physical wounds. We cannot heal an emotional wound in which we attempt to avoid the pain of probing it and cleansing it. If we did that with physical wounds, we would get infections. The wound that might have started just on our arm starts to infect other areas of our body, because we neglected to probe it, cleanse it, and medicate it. The small wound we ignored becomes a greater wound we can't ignore. Similarly, when we attempt to avoid facing the pain of our emotional wounds by staying in our minds and always attempting to intellectualize it, this only causes that wound to infect other areas of our psyche, leading to greater pain. We always have a choice: to face the pain of healing or the greater pain of not healing, the greater pain that comes from avoiding the discomfort of the wound. We can choose to experience the pain that is caused by the wound, or we can choose to experience the suffering caused by what will become an infection, a problem no longer confined to just one area of our life.

Over-Identifying & Attaching to False Identities

Today, people are influenced to form their identity around their lower-order desires, as well as their emotions, tests in life, traumas, or even their mental

65 Malik, A. R. (2021).

health disorders, defining themselves completely by their difficult psychological challenges. But there is great harm in defining oneself by an experience, rather than by who we really are at our core. Our identity is that, above all, we are a *ruh*, and we are the creation and servants of God. This is our core identity, yet it is an identity that many do not identify with. People are more likely to define themselves by being the employee of so-and-so, or a worker at a certain company, or even the spouse or father of someone, than they are to identify with belonging to God, and being who they were before they even had a physical body, a life in this world, or a family to belong to.

Identity is simply defined as who we are. But the question is, what makes up who we are? In the psychology world, the definition of identity is a bit more complex. In psychology, we view identity to be made up of several things. Identity is associated with a person's unique personality traits, self-concept, self-image, and self-esteem. It is centered around how a person views who they are. And this view is oftentimes centered around only the mind's view and not the heart's view. Identity is usually centered around the mind's understanding of who we are, negating the heart and soul's understanding of who we are that actually informs our mental understanding.

But putting aside spirituality for a moment, our mind does have its own capacity to form a perception of who we are (self-concept), how we appear (self-image), and the unique qualities we possess (or personality traits). And these are aspects that can help us understand ourselves in this world, but they also are aspects that have a potential to evolve. Our perception of ourselves, our interests, our personality traits, and our self-image may change over time. While some traits may stay with us from childhood to adulthood, some traits cease to exist as we get older. We may no longer view ourselves a certain way. There are many aspects of our identity that are not permanent. But there is one aspect of who we are that is always permanent and that is our *ruh*. There is no aspect of our identity that is more permanent or more important than our *ruh* (our soul and higher self), and the heart that is created to align with it, so that our actions may reflect that alignment. Therefore, this has to be the greatest aspect we identify with. But to do that, the heart needs to be the lead. It is the heart that has the power to reflect the light of the *ruh*, and to form its perception of who we are through God, not just through the information the mind has about who we are.

Throughout our lifetime, the mind has gathered so much information about who we are, and at times that information is gathered to support our *nafs*'s perception of who we are, but the heart can play a role in helping us have a more holistic and sacred view of ourselves. When we do not lead from the heart, we will be left to the mind and its information to form our view of who

we are, and that view may have truthful elements, but it won't be fully accurate, holistic, or in service of our inner peace, growth, and journey in this world.

When we lead and live from our minds, we may depend on the information collected by it to form how we think and feel about who we are. For example, if someone went through childhood abuse and were constantly told that they were worthless, the mind lives with that information and forms our identity and self-perception through that information. So, if we lead from the mind and treat it as the final authority of who we are, we will also be led by that self-perception of being worthless, and it will be harder to unlearn that self-perception. This is why I truly believe that the heart and its role needs to be emphasized even in trauma work, for if we learn to lead from the heart and prioritize its alignment with the *ruh*, we can use our heart to inform our minds of better thoughts and beliefs about who we are that are more God-centered and sacred – and not limited to people's definitions of who we are or our own definitions of who we are. Also, as mentioned earlier, if we lead from the mind or *nafs*, we will have an unhealthy need to intellectualize and rationalize everything, so the need to place a label on all our experiences, emotions, and ourselves becomes a priority.

If we are led by our *nafs* or lower self, we will have an unhealthy and imbalanced need to attach to labels, for it serves the desire of the ego to assert its identity within our being and gain self importance. This is why people like to associate themselves with celebrities or famous people who are known, because the ego gets the satisfaction of feeling important by saying, "I know that person," or "I am the friend of so-and-so." The ego constantly chases the opportunity to assert its self-importance. In addition, if we lead from our *nafs*, then our lower-order desires become the center of our focus and perception of ourselves as well. For example, when people say, "I am a foodie," they have made the desire for food part of their identity. When people say this phrase, they are not referring to their need for basic food to survive. They are talking about their *nafs* and its excessive desire for good food in their lives. There is nothing wrong with valuing good and nourishing food, but anything in excess and out of balance is not good for our souls. God tells us in the Qur'an: "*Eat from the good things We have provided for you, but do not overstep the bounds (or exceed balance, abuse them, or be exessive), or My wrath will descend on you. Anyone on whom My wrath descends has truly fallen*" (20:81).

Our identity is defined through identifying who "I" is. And there is nothing wrong with giving many descriptions to define who "I" is. But we cannot negate that the most important aspect of "I" is not our fleeting thoughts, emotions, struggles, or even physical forms. And most definitely, our identity cannot be formed around lower-self desires. Who we are is centered around our heart

(that serves our *ruh*), and our actions (that reflect the truths in the heart). It is *this* "I" that God looks at that is most important. As Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) teaches us, "*Verily Allah does not look to your faces and your wealth but He looks to your heart and to your deeds.*"[66]

God does not define us by how much information our mind has, how self-important we are, the varying emotions we feel, our physical desires or preferences, or even our physical forms and image. We are defined by being spiritual beings above anything else. And we are defined by the actual values and beliefs of our heart and how those beliefs and values shape our actions, behaviors, and interactions with others and the world.

But in today's world, people have a tendency to over-identify with fleeting thoughts, emotions, information or knowledge they have, or their experiences – rather than what they actually believe in their hearts, what they actually value, and what they actually *do* and how they choose to live their lives. And this is what causes great psychological and spiritual distress and creates barriers to true growth. I see this very often in my work. A person may have a distorted sense of self, because they are defining themselves by how they are thinking or feeling in the moment, not what they actually do. For example, a client may say, "*I am a horrible person for being agitated with so-and-so.*" I may then ask them, "*Is your view of yourself as being horrible due to you feeling frustration or agitation?*" And they may say, "*Yes, because I shouldn't be agitated, I should be more patient, because that is the Islamic or right thing to do.*" They might even over-identify with their agitation and say, "*I am an impatient person,*" or "*I am a bad Muslim.*" They start defining themselves by their emotion. But when I ask them questions like, "*What evidence from your actions support that you are an impatient person?*," "*How did this agitation affect your dealings with this person?*" "*Did you speak unkindly to them?*" "*Did you treat them badly?*" – they will often say, "*No, this is just what I was feeling inside.*" In those moments, I show them how they are defining themselves by a fleeting emotion such as agitation, and that their actions actually show no evidence that they are impatient. I remind them that God does not hold them accountable for what they think and feel, but what they actually do. This is reflected in the following *hadith*, where Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) said: "*Allah (God), the Mighty and Sublime, has forgiven my Ummah for what is whispered to them or what enters their minds, so long as they do not act upon it or speak of it.*"[67]

In addition to over-identifying with thoughts and feelings, many people over-identify with their lower-order desires, and tend to experience great anxiety and sadness when those desires are not in line with God, even though they may

66 *Sahīh Muslim,* 2564c.

67 *Sunan an-Nasa'i,* 3434.

have never acted upon those desires. I have worked with many Muslims who experience a lot of psychological distress because they are desiring something that they know goes against their faith. When I ask them, "*Do you want to act upon it?*" or "*Did you act upon it?*" a lot of times they say no, and still feel like they are a bad person, not realizing that they actually are being rewarded by God by not acting upon a thought, feeling, or desire to do something that is displeasing to Him. This is a truth taught to us through the following *hadith*, in which Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) has said: "*Verily Allah (God) recorded the good and the evil and then made it clear that whoever thinks of doing a good deed then does not do it, Allah (God) will write it down as one complete good deed in his favour. If he thinks of doing a good deed and then does it, Allah (God) (may He be glorified and exalted) will write it down between ten and seven hundred fold, or many more. If he thinks of doing a bad deed then he does not do it, Allah (God) will write it down as one complete good deed, and if he thinks of it then does it, Allah (God) will write it down as one bad deed.*"[68]

God does not judge us by what we *think* we might do, but by what we *actually* do. He loves to see us elevate ourselves beyond every thought in our mind and beyond every desire of our lower self. He loves to see us fight against being led by our mind and egos, and instead lead from our heart that longs for Him, and act in a way that serves our higher self. God loves when we do not transgress ourselves or harm ourselves, which is essentially what sinning does. It does not harm God. It only harms us. God loves when we see our own worth and view ourselves from a place of higher value. He taught us that our worth comes from something far greater, far higher – and that is the state of our soul, and how we choose to serve it through our heart and actions. At our core, we are souls. Everything else (from our thoughts, emotions, desires, wants, to our struggles and challenges) can be attributes or experiences we go through in this world and that can change throughout our life, but nothing is as permanent as being a *ruh*.

But despite God only looking at our hearts and actions, many people today are over-identifying with false identities. Our thoughts, emotions, and desires are all false identities. They do not define our worth, who we are, or how God sees us and judges us. Even our challenges, struggles, trials, and tests are false identities. They shape our experiences in this world but not who we are. But unfortunately, a common tendency in modern times is to also form our identity around our struggles in life. We start to over-identify with physical illnesses, mental health disorders, traumas, or tests in life, and this is also problematic, for then we become less powerful at interacting with them in a positive and helpful way. We may start to feel less worthy or valuable because of a struggle

68 *Sahīh Muslim*, 131.

we are going through. Or, we will feel more helpless and complacent when we view our entire being through the lens of one experience or challenge in life (whether that be a physical, psychological, or personal challenge). When we call something our identity, we disconnect ourselves from the power we have to change, improve, or remove that very thing, because we have given it a permanent place. We also have a greater tendency to attach our very worth to that experience we are going through.

There is a growing tendency for mental health disorders to become many people's identity, which often creates more harm than good. Even in my clinical work, I have seen how diagnosing someone can be helpful at times, and other times be harmful to their healing journey. It usually is harmful when the client over-identifies with their disorder. This is why we have therapeutic approaches that place less emphasis on diagnosis, such as Solution Focused Therapy. And this is why I take an eclectic approach to my therapy work, that allows me to pull from different therapeutic modalities depending on the client's needs and what best serves the client's well-being and treatment.

When we over-identify with a problem or struggle in our life, the ego begins to attach its worth to it, and it becomes harder for a person to let go of that identity even when the problem has passed or is getting better. I have worked with clients who struggled to heal, because they became over-attached to the identity of being, for example, depressed or anxious. An example of this is a client I worked with who struggled with severe depression. After 6 months of work together, she stopped self-harming, no longer had suicidal thoughts, was happier and more functional in all areas of her life. But as her treatment was coming to an end, I picked up on fear she was having around actually feeling better and I was concerned that she may self-sabotage her progress. After further exploration, I was able to figure out that she was attached to being the person with depression. She said that for so long, she identified as being depressed, that not being that person anymore scared her. She *became* her depression. Depression no longer was just an experience or struggle in life, but who she was. And she was deeply attached to being depressed and the attention she got for identifying as such. In addition, the shows she was watching, as well as the music she was listening to (especially when she was sad), only strengthened her attachment to her depression, at times indirectly and directly glorified her emotional struggles, and only promoted the idea of making mental health disorders a person's identity. Unfortunately this is a growing reality in our times, and I saw many examples of this in my clinical experience, especially in recent years. I have had clients who came into therapy more attached to receiving a mental health diagnosis than actually healing. And this happens when the *nafs* is the lead. It has something to gain (i.e., attention, importance,

labels, knowing) from a diagnosis. But when the heart is the lead, the goal is healing, and if need be, receiving a diagnosis only becomes the means to that healing, not the end.

We have to always remember that there are many things in life that are the means but not the end, that are just experiences, and not who we are. Our thoughts, emotions, challenges, tests, trials, and mental health challenges are not the end and do not define our entire identity. They play a role on our path in this world, but they do not define our destination, our entire worth or who we are as a whole.

A Heart That Does Not Feel Whole, Enough or Sufficed

One of the greatest psycho-spiritual harms of not leading with the heart, is that we deprive ourselves of wholehearted living – a kind of living that leaves our heart full, sufficed, and feeling enough and whole through our Creator. This is a great consequence of not leading from the heart, and instead leading from the *nafs* or mind. Today, many people are walking around with hearts that are empty, not sufficed, that feel not enough, and are attached to all the wrong places for nourishment. The heart was designed to be whole through God, not people, not material wealth, not status, not fame, and not any false idol. But the heart cannot experience wholeness or fullness when it is not the lead. The heart cannot be sufficed if we prioritize all the wrong places for its nourishment. The heart cannot feel enough if its condition, growth, and nourishment are not our greatest priority and concern.

When the heart is not given its rightful position of leader, we will find ourselves in a constant chase of validation from the wrong sources. And, we will always feel not good enough, not productive enough, not accomplished enough, and not successful enough. We will develop a sense of inferiority, a constant experience of feeling *less than*. We will end up viewing ourselves, our experiences, and the world through a lens of scarcity – where nothing is enough – and not a lens of abundance, where even the tiniest blessing or experience becomes more than enough.

Today, many people have a *nafs* that is full and satiated, and a heart that isn't. Their hearts are left starving, thirsty, unsatiated, and feeling disconnected from the value of all that we do. Many of us today also have minds that are full, filled with so much value, but we do not feel the effects of that value in our life, because the heart is disconnected from it. When the mind is the lead, and not the servant, it cannot serve the heart with the value it contains. The heart is left malnourished. This is what is leading people to feel scattered, and like they are on cruise control, just going through the motions in life, without a connection to the value of what they are doing each day. As a result, they find

themselves at the end of the day feeling mentally, emotionally, and spiritually drained, exhausted, or worse, empty. It is because the heart wasn't a priority. Their physical body was living, but their spiritual body was not alive. When we lead from the heart, we start to value being present, intentional, grateful, and awakened to God and our experiences. We start to value quality over quantity, connection over just being connected, the nourishment of the heart over the nourishment of the ego, and walking away from our acts of worship and experiences with fuller hearts, not just fuller minds or a fuller *nafs*. We start to value all that suffices the heart and contributes to its fullness and wholeness, and as a result, we feel a spiritual revival that benefits our *whole* being.

A Lack of *Istiqamah* & Consistency in Our Spiritual & Emotional Growth

Istiqamah is a key value and practice that Islam teaches us to work hard to develop and cultivate in our lives. The word *istiqamah* is often translated as "steadfastness," and it means to go forth in a straight manner and in the right or truthful direction, to act in the *right* and *just* way without deviating from that straight or truthful path. The word *istiqamah*, linguistically, is related to the characteristics of rising or standing upright or firmly (*qaa'im* or *qaama*), establishment or upholding of what is right (*iqamah*), and holding on to what is straight (*mustaqeem*) and not crooked. In the first chapter of the Qur'an (the *Fatiha*), the chapter we recite in every standing (*rakat*) of prayer, we ask God to "guide us on the *siratul mustaqeem*," which means the straight path (essentially the path of God). Staying on this *straight* path that directs us to God requires *istiqamah*: steadfastness, an upholding of what is right, true, and in service of our higher self. *Istiqamah* is essentially the work of consistently establishing in our lives what God called us to, such as establishing the prayer (*iqamat al salah*) and all that serves the success and condition of our soul in this world, but also the next. God tells us in the Qur'an, "*So stand you (O Muhammad) firm and straight as you are commanded and those who turn in repentance with you, and transgress not. Verily, He is All-Seer of what you do*" (12:112).

Istiqamah is the ability to hold fast to what God has prescribed for us through the Qur'an and *sunnah*. It is the ability to be consistent in showing up or "rising" to what God has taught us serves us spiritually and holistically. *Istiqamah* is one of the hardest things we can cultivate on our path in this world. Especially in the world we live in today, many people struggle with *istiqamah* and consistency in the actions that serve them holistically, because the heart is not in the lead. Many people today are worshiping their mind, so they walk towards God and rise to establish what He commanded, *only* when they understand Him or comprehend His truths and plan. Many people today

worship their *nafs* and feel-good emotions, so they walk towards God and stay on *siratul mustaqeem*, *only* when they *feel* good.

When the heart is *not* a priority or lead, it won't carry you to God when your mind, ego, and emotions won't. It won't carry you to God in all your imperfect conditions. It won't lead your being to the prayer mat, to the mosque, to lift your hands in *dua*, or to reap the benefits of good deeds and actions, when your emotions, ego, or mind are leading you in the opposite direction. You didn't treat it as a priority, as the lead, so how can it lead you when you need it most?

When our mind is the lead,
we walk towards God
only as far as we comprehend Him
When our ego (or *nafs*) is the lead,
we walk towards God
only when it makes us feel good
When our heart is the lead,
we walk towards God
in all our conditions.[69]

If the heart is not a priority, we will be completely inconsistent with our acts of worship, but also with *all* actions that serve us on any other level. We will find ourselves only working out or eating healthy when we feel good and then abandoning the practice on the days we don't feel motivated. We will find ourselves only going to therapy or doing the work of healing when we feel good, and stop when we start to become agitated. We will be at the mercy of what we think and feel, and will find ourselves controlled by our thoughts and emotions.

Perfectionism

An outcome of not leading from the heart is an attachment to perfectionism where we develop an unhelpful mindset of *all or nothing*. We will find ourselves functioning from one extreme to another. We will find ourselves doing many, many acts of worship at a given time and then go from doing that to doing nothing or a significantly lesser amount the next day, week, or month. This comes from not leading from the heart and leading from other facets within us. In fact, I find perfectionism to be rooted in us leading from the mind and *nafs*. The perfectionist has a very rigid idea of what a perfect day looks like, what a perfect spiritual person looks like, what a perfectly healthy and productive day looks like. Their worth is often attached to maintaining that

69 Poem by the author.

rigid idea or definition of what perfection looks like in various areas of their lives. The *nafs* comes into play here because the *nafs* doesn't like us feeling any sort of inadequacy. This is why anytime we don't feel secure or worthy, it pushes us to immediately soothe ourselves through any means, so that we can escape the agitation that comes from that inadequacy we may feel within. As a result, one finds themselves in this vicious cycle of feeling worthy *only* when they feel they are perfect, and when that perfect image (inevitably) crumbles, they find themselves subsequently feeling high levels of shame, low self-worth, emptiness and inadequacy. People will stay in this cycle until they realize they need to abandon perfectionism. Through the H.O.M.E. Method, I teach that perfectionism can be tackled when we stop leading from the mind and *nafs*, and start leading from the heart. The heart does not seek perfectionism. It seeks truth. Therefore we have to choose authenticity over perfectionism, because the heart is fueled by what is true, not what is perfect.

Social Harms

Some of the greatest harms of not leading from the heart exist within community spaces and impact us socially. That is because when we do not prioritize the heart within us, we won't prioritize the heart within others. When we do not do the work of training our hearts to come to the lead, we won't recognize when our ego rises up to lead our interactions with others.

This inner work of understanding who we are, our psycho-spiritual design, and the power of our own hearts, allows us to become more empathetic, present, compassionate, and truly helpful to those we interact with. We become more aware of when we are over-intellectualizing (or over-rationalizing) people's problems and dismissing or minimizing the spiritual and emotional experience they are going through. We will become more sensitive to our own ego coming up in our communication with others, and which place we are speaking from when we are listening or advising others.

Our heart is the greatest tool of connection God has given us. It is the most powerful tool within us that allows us to connect to God, ourselves, the world, and others. When we do not prioritize this sacred facet within us, we won't lead from this facet, and as a result we rob ourselves from truly connecting to others, but we also prevent others from connecting to *us*. Our hearts being present with the hearts of others is more important than expressing what our mind knows just because it's information we stored and have identified as relevant to their experience. If our mind automatically goes fishing for the "right" thing to say when someone is expressing their experience, we deprive our hearts from being present with others and what their heart is actually experiencing. As a result, what we stored in our minds will just become stored in theirs, and it won't be

of any benefit to the heart that came and left feeling unseen and unheard. We all just walk away with minds overloaded and hearts still malnourished. And God knows we need more nourished hearts than over-stimulated minds in our world today. When we lead from the heart, we become more present with people and we allow our heart to fully receive what they share with us. We stop worrying about what we are going to say, and we find solace and assurance in the truth that: when the heart understands the experience of others, it knows what to retrieve from the mind, and it knows how to guide the tongue to speak the words that serve the heart in front of us.

Our community spaces should be nourishing outlets for those who are struggling, but I have noticed time and time again that people tend to seclude themselves from the community when they are struggling. There are many reasons for this, but one of the most common reasons I found is that too often when people come to us with a struggle, we speak as "Islam" rather than as human beings who are practicing Islam. This deprives others of human connection, because the Word of God is perfect but we are imperfect. So, when someone comes to us with their imperfection and right away we present "perfection," without seeing and speaking to their human experience, what that can do is make the person feel overwhelmed, alienated, and insecure or emotionally unsafe. As a result, their ego will come to the surface because that is what the ego attempts to do when it recognizes any discomfort, agitation, or insecurity within us. But, when we prioritize the hearts of others, make people feel emotionally safe, and don't immediately present them with perfection, we create a space where their ego does not need to come up and maintain their image.

My name is not "Islam"
I already have a name
and behind that name
is an imperfect soul
journeying through an
imperfect human experience
And the struggle of this life
is to keep this eye of my heart
on the only One who is Most Perfect.[70]

We need to be bridges between the imperfect human struggle and the perfect Words of God. We are so programmed to say cookie-cutter, perfectly packaged, Islamically relevant advice rather than saying – and more importantly *doing* – what is Islamically right for the unique person and situation in front

70 Poem by the author.

of us, which is showing compassion in our words and actions, being human and authentic with people, sometimes even showing our own vulnerability and imperfection, validating their human struggle, showing up with our support, and listening wholeheartedly so that our advice and reminder to them speaks to their individual situation.

When we show up with our hearts (and not our minds or egos) as the lead, a very beautiful and powerful experience happens. People end up feeling seen, heard, validated, and accepted, and as a result their hearts become softer, more open, and ready to receive advice. When we finally do arrive at the part where we attempt to give them advice and remind them of God and His truths, they are actually more open to listening. Because they were able to connect with another imperfect human being, that authentic connection itself led them to God and His perfection.

This is the power of being a bridge between people's hearts and God. But we can only be a bridge and *not* a wall between the hearts of others and God when we understand the sacred responsibility in caring for our own hearts but also the hearts of those who enter our spaces. When someone comes to you with a struggle, do not immediately and directly present them with spiritual perfection without addressing their human experience. Without our humanness, we wouldn't even have a struggle, so to ignore one's imperfect human experience is to devalue the struggle itself. This is how you create a wall between their heart and God.

We all need to be heard, seen, and validated. And when a heart feels seen and heard, the ego that is linked to our humanness begins to become subdued and the heart that is linked to the state of our souls becomes open and ready to receive. This is what happens when we stop being a talking Islam box when people come to us with their challenges. This is what happens when we don't dismiss someone's humanness. This is what happens when we become bridges for people between their imperfect human struggle and the perfect Words of God. We end up speaking to people's hearts and not their egos.

We have to also be aware of this when we are presenting mental health information to others. Another great harm of leading from our minds and over-intellectualizing our growth and healing is that we do not beautify our interactions with others. In a world where there is so much information about wellness, what we are deeply missing is seeing the value of that knowledge in the way we interact with one another, in the way our actions care for each other's hearts. We know how to speak and identify mental health language and terms, but we miss opportunities to actually use what we know to do something way more impactful: connect meaningfully. We miss opportunities to just listen, to truly hear what another soul needs in that moment, and to sincerely explore

how we can be a better friend, sister, spouse, or parent to that person. And above all, we miss opportunities to actually show up.

We as a society have become so comfortable with just knowing, just being aware, just saying words that sound nice, just having the right information, but we have much-needed growth when it comes to seeing the value of actually *being* there for others through our actions, and not just through our words. Because in any relationship, the value of showing up will always outweigh the value of speaking *about* showing up. Words lose their value when they are not followed by actions that make others feel loved, seen, heard, and – above all – valued.

And while I understand that we live in a world where technology and the internet has made communication so easy that we have become so comfortable with the level of connection it allows us to have with others, we should never forget the greater level and value of connecting in real life, in sitting face to face with someone and connecting with another heart – in just being present with another soul in an actual physical space. And noone exemplified this better than Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), who despite the immense responsibilities that weighed heavily on his shoulders, took the time to tend to the needs of others, hold space for their struggles, and be present with them. A perfect example of this was when the companions found the prophet (ﷺ) sitting with a child and consoling him after he had lost his bird.[71] Our prophet led with the heart, and therefore, the hearts of others were always a priority for him, and no struggle of another was ever too small for him to value.

In our world today, many people are connected but not experiencing connection. We live in a time where we are substituting real connection with the illusion of connection we experience through social media platforms, constantly texting, and being online. This fast-paced, high-tech, ego-promoting world is programming us to minimize the value we see in real life connections, in thinking about people other than ourselves, in physically showing up in the world that is right in front of us. Nothing can replace the power, the healing, the energy, and the nourishment that presence with others offers us. Nothing can replace the value of hugging your child and sitting with them for a few moments to see how they feel about their day. Nothing can replace you calling someone and hearing their voice instead of just sending them a text that doesn't truly convey your joy to speak to them. Nothing can replace giving your actual time and attention to your spouse to help them with something they need or to hold space for them to share what is on their mind. Nothing can replace taking the time to meet a friend for coffee and asking about their heart. Nothing can

71 *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* 4969

replace buying a gift for your parents and telling them how much they mean to you. Nothing can replace showing up for someone you know is struggling. Nothing can replace the nourishment that comes from taking a walk or sitting with someone you love.

We all could use more of that in our world. And all it takes is reconnecting to the power and value such actions hold not only for the heart you are doing it for, but for your own heart as well. For, as you show up for another soul and their heart, you will witness the greater ways in which God shows up for *you* and your heart. This is a truth reflected in the following *hadith*, where Prophet Muhammad(ﷺ) said: *If anyone relieves a Muslim believer from one of the hardships of this worldly life, Allah (God) will relieve him of one of the hardships of the Day of Resurrection. If anyone makes it easy for the one who is indebted to him (while finding it difficult to repay), Allah (God) will make it easy for him in this worldly life and in the Hereafter, and if anyone conceals the faults of a Muslim, Allah (God) will conceal his faults in this world and in the Hereafter. Allah (God) helps His servant as long as he helps his brother.*"[72]

Respect the heart
in you
And you will
respect the heart
in others
Lead from your heart
and you will
help others
lead from theirs.[73]

Everything Islam teaches is centered around the health and care of the heart. For example, the reason backbiting is such a heavy sin is because it hardens hearts towards each other, and everything about Islam is centered upon softening the heart so that it can meet others with warmth, love, and compassion. When we talk about people and mention their flaws or anything negative about them, we are impacting the perception of that person in the heart we are speaking to. The heart is very sensitive to what it receives and Islam at its core is about caring for hearts: our own heart and the heart of others. So when we talk about people to others, we must first ask ourselves: "*How am I caring for my heart and theirs in sharing this?*" "*Why do I even feel a need to mention this person's name in a gathering they are not present in? And is it serving my heart or ego?*"

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72 *Sahīh Muslim*, Book 16, Hadith 29.

73 Poem by the author.

Our heart is the most sacred thing we have. And only when we learn to care for our own hearts in a sacred way, will we truly understand what it means to care for the hearts of others in a sacred way as well. When we lead from our hearts, we will not make it hard for others to lead from theirs – for the hearts of others to be nourished as well. When we do not lead from our hearts, we end up rejecting our own heart's needs, and as a result, we will reject the needs of others' hearts as well, which is a form of social rejection, and this has a very harmful impact. In psychology, we recognize that social rejection is not only heart-breaking but it is associated with increased levels of anger, depression, and anxiety. It can have a real impact on our cognitive, emotional, and even physical health. Research also speaks to the fact that a broken heart from rejection can be as painful as a broken bone. It was even discovered that emotional pain that people may feel from a breakup or rejection share the same neural pathways as physical pain.[74] This highlights that emotional pain is real and should be taken as seriously as physical pain. Whether we are feeling like our voice is not heard or ignored, excluded from a group, feeling left out by our communities, or turned away by someone we love, the various forms of rejection we may experience can cause significant pain in our lives. This is particularly why Islam contains teachings that protect hearts from the pains of social rejection. For example, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us that if three people are sitting together, two of those people should not be speaking secretly to each other (or whispering) in the presence of that third person, *"for that would grieve him."*[75] This is to protect people's hearts from feeling rejected, hurt, ignored, and heartbroken. This is how our beloved prophet (ﷺ) taught us to care for the hearts of others. It is practices like this that improves the health of our hearts and the health of our social spaces. The absence of such practices and consideration creates great pain. I have worked with many people who struggled from great emotional pain due to feeling excluded by friends, family, and members of their community at their mosque or gatherings and events. Social rejection creates great pain and produces negative mental, emotional, and social ripple effects in our communities. But we can minimize this by doing the work of leading from our hearts instead of our egos.

Spiritual Bypassing

Spiritual bypassing is when we utilize our religious and spiritual beliefs to avoid facing our issues, our emotional struggles, our hurts and wounds, painful feelings, and the discomfort we need to actually grow. After exploring spiritual

74 Eisenberger, N. I. (2012).

75 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, 6290.

bypassing for many years in my clinical work, I recognized an important truth, which is that spiritual bypassing is a result of leading with the *nafs*.

Spiritual bypassing is one of the greatest harms of not leading from the heart, and that is because it prevents us from true growth and healing. The heart (as mentioned earlier) seeks truth. The *nafs* seeks comfort. The *nafs* will do anything to avoid facing its pain. It will attach to anything (even the most beautiful things) and use it (or abuse it) to its benefit. And there is nothing easier for the *nafs* to attach to or more beautiful for it to use as a means of escaping our truths, pain, mistakes, or problems, than religious and spiritual teachings.

It is so easy for people to hide their imperfection behind the perfection and beauty of Islam. Without realizing, many people use Islamic and spiritual teachings to keep themselves comfortable and to avoid making difficult choices or facing their pain, while thinking they are doing "the right thing" or that this is what being "religious" looks like. But Islam is not meant to be a mask for our struggles. It is meant to be a means of growth, healing, and holistic transformation.

Islam is not a mask
for our wounds
Do not hide
your imperfection
behind Islam's perfection
and expect to grow and heal[76]

But if we are constantly led by our *nafs*, we will try to immediately use Islam, spiritual teachings, and even mental health and self-help jargon to help us bypass our actual struggles. A perfect example I can give you of spiritual bypassing is when I was speaking to a woman who told me she was really struggling, feeling depressed, and is in a bad place mentally. When I explored further, her response to me was quoting the *hadith* where the Prophet (ﷺ) says, "*The world is a prison for the believer.*"[77] While this is a beautiful and true *hadith*, she was using it to justify her clinical depression. She was not in therapy. She was not interested in exploring her pain further and seeing how she can heal from the impact of traumas she was going through. She was doing exactly what spiritual bypassing is, which is trying to jump over (or bypass) all the pain she was feeling and justifying it beautifully with "Islam." Another example of using Islam as a mask for our wounds is when people engage in behaviors like people-pleasing. Oftentimes, it can be very scary for a person to

76 Poem by the author.

77 *Sahīh Muslim*, 2956.

break free of constantly prioritizing everyone's approval, because it leaves them feeling very emotionally unsafe. People-pleasing is often a trauma response and learned behavior that people engage in to avoid deeper fears, such as the fear of abandonment. The fear of being emotionally abandoned is a very real fear for many people, and therefore engaging in people-pleasing is a way to avoid that. They try their best to make everyone happy, because they are afraid if there is conflict, then people will leave them or disconnect from them– not just physically, but also emotionally. This is a hard cycle to break because one would have to face the intense fear of abandonment underlying it. As a result, to avoid that pain and discomfort, the *nafs* will influence us to use Islam as a mask. This means that, to support their habit of people-pleasing, people might say things like, "*Well Islam teaches us to be good to people.*" They try to convince themselves that their people-pleasing behaviors are a spiritual and religious act, but it isn't. In fact, Islam teaches us to prioritize God's opinion, validation, watchfulness, and approval over people's. And many times, what people don't realize is that people-pleasing is different from being kind and good to others in a God-centered way, and can often lead them to prioritize people over God. So spiritual bypassing or using Islam as a mask for their wounds doesn't work and often actually contradicts Islam's very teachings.

When the *nafs* or ego is at the center, we will always try to monitor the impression of others and the ideal image we have of who we think we *should* be to gain the acceptance of people. I see this all the time in my therapy work with Muslims. Many times, a practicing Muslim client will have a really hard time telling me what the real issue is, because they are spending so much time talking *around* the issue and packaging things beautifully for me so I don't think they are a "bad" Muslim, or so that their ego feels secure in the way they are presenting themselves. Through my H.O.M.E. Method, I explain to them how our ego or *nafs* oftentimes keeps us from facing the real and truthful issues of our heart. I point out to them how I still don't know what they are struggling with because everything seems so beautiful. They will often spend significant time listing all the beautiful things they gained through the struggle by saying, "*Alhamdulilah, I learned this and that through the test,*" to which I respond, "*That is beautiful, and it's great to have gratitude even through hardships, but can you clarify for me what you came to counseling to work on or work through?*" I tell them that I want to maximize their valuable time and truly be able to help them, but I can't do that if they are worried about presenting a perfect spiritual image. This has helped many of my clients to put their guard down, to stop exhausting themselves to monitor and maintain this "perfect" image they have of what it means to be a Muslim struggling mentally, emotionally, or spiritually. I often work to get them to realize that it takes more energy to

be perfect than to be real or truthful, and they have the choice, especially in the safe space of my office, to choose to utilize their energy in service of their growth rather than in service of staying stuck in the same place out of fear of appearing anything other than perfect.

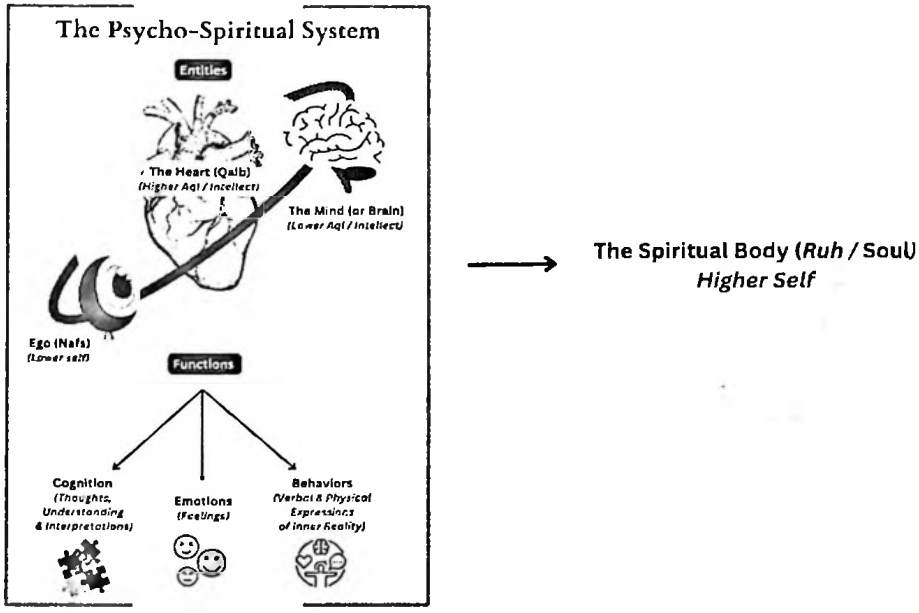
You see, the work of leading from the heart is so powerful. It is what allows people to say no to their *nafs* and put their ego aside, and get the help they need to actually grow. And while we might not see many examples of this in our community spaces, we see many examples of this in the *seerah*, in the life of the Prophet (ﷺ) and in the life of his companions, especially in Madinah. People came to the Prophet (ﷺ) with all kinds of problems. They spoke to each other about their issues. They did not hide behind the perfection of Islam. They were not living from their ideal self, but rather from their true self, while recognizing the ideal they are working towards. They did not spiritually bypass. They faced their shortcomings, problems, struggles head on. They exemplified what it means to lead from their heart which prioritizes truth, and not from their *nafs* which prioritizes comfort and self-image.

9

The H.O.M.E. Method's Psycho-Spiritual Model

The H.O.M.E Method's Psycho-Spiritual Model consists of 2 parts, ***the psycho-spiritual system*** and ***the spiritual body***. The psycho-spiritual system consists of the entities that make up key psychological and spiritual facets within us. These entities include the heart, the mind, and the ego, which is what the acronym H.O.M.E. stands for. Together, these entities make up the psycho-spiritual system which serves the following functions: 1) cognition, 2) emotions, and 3) behaviors.

The Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method's Psycho-Spiritual Model (Figure 1)



The Spiritual Body (the *Ruh* or Soul): Our Higher Self

The H.O.M.E. Method gives the greatest importance to the spiritual body, which is our *ruh* or soul, and what is referred to in this method as our higher self. This method is designed to help you build the muscle of living from this higher place, your soul, by prioritizing the care of the central system that serves it, which I define through the H.O.M.E. Method, as the *psycho-spiritual system*.

When the entities of the *psycho-spiritual system* are aligned with their God-given design, the system functions in a way that serves the needs of our soul and our holistic wellness. Through the H.O.M.E. Method, the highest goal is that we care for the soul's freedom and peace in this world, and for the state in which it returns to its Creator in the next world.

The *ruh* (or spiritual body) is not included in the *psycho-spiritual system* and in the acronym of *H.O.M.E.* for the central reason that the *ruh,* unlike the heart, mind, or ego, is not an inner tool or function we navigate. It is who we are. It is our core essence, and our true base and permanent identity. It is where we live from.

Today, we are driven more than ever to form our identity around the needs and drives of our lower self. Everywhere we look, especially in the West, there is a pressure to define ourselves or identify who we are by our lower-order desires, such as sexual desires, or our desire to over-fill our stomachs, or our desire to maintain a perfect external image (by chasing the latest fashions or trends). But even outside of our lower-self or *nafsi* desires, even our passing thoughts, emotions, and our tests and struggles, do not define who we are. They are experiences on our path or experiences within our inner world, but not who we are at our base. Who we are at our core is something much higher. God created us with much greater value than for us to be defined by external circumstances, emotional states, the drives of our lower self (or *nafs*), or the varying mental experiences of our mind. From our media, to movies and shows, there is this emphasis on making everything except our spiritual essence and our relationship with God our identity.

This *ruh* is our core identity, and our most permanent and eternal self. It is who we always were, before this world and this body existed, and who we always will be, after this world and this body ceases to exist. This is why it has to be our priority and its care has to be the center of our focus. The health and condition of this *ruh* is dependent on how we navigate and take care of our *psycho-spiritual system.*

The Relationship Between The *Ruh* & The *Psycho-Spiritual System*

We need to prioritize the health of the spiritual body as we prioritize the health of the physical body. To do that, we have to prioritize the system that serves its health, and that is the *psycho-spiritual system.*

The spiritual body (*ruh*), its health and condition, is directly impacted by the *psycho-spiritual system*, very similar to how the health of our physical body is directly impacted by any of the anatomical systems within it. By looking at the different biological systems within our physical body, we can see how

each of the systems impact the health and condition of the physical body. For example, the digestive system consists of the following main organs (or entities): the esophagus, the stomach, the large intestine, and the small intestine. These organs and their ability to function impact the entire physical body, but the physical body is not an entity within the digestive system. Similarly, the *psycho-spiritual system* consists of the entities (i.e, heart, mind, and ego) that directly impact the condition of the spiritual body, but the spiritual body is not an entity within that system.

The H.O.M.E. Method promotes the prioritization of our spiritual body, for it impacts everything else, including our physical body. But unfortunately, in the world we live in, we only value what is seen and measurable, and disregard what is unseen as less important. And there is a reason for this. We prioritize our physical body over our spiritual body, because we are afraid of physical death. We are programmed to survive, so we are hyperattentive to anything that might threaten our physical life. We understand that disease or illness in our physical body threatens our human life, and we might die. So if we go to the doctor, and he tells us our respiratory system is not functioning well, we will get scared. We understand that this affects the greater physical body, and can threaten its stability, quality of living, and life itself. Because of this fear and the world's emphasis on what is physical over what is spiritual, we often neglect the greater body we exist from, the part of us that is permanent, that is higher, more sacred, and transcends this temporary human experience. And this is the *ruh*, our soul, and higher self.

We forget that the spiritual body *also* can live and die, and its survival and health can also be threatened. Just like the physical body requires that its systems are healthy for it to live, the spiritual body requires that the *psycho-spiritual system* is healthy and aligned for it to also experience stability and life. The only difference is that life and death for the soul is not a physical one. God has given the soul eternal life, while the physical body was given temporary life. Therefore, the use of the words "*life*" and *"death"* when discussing the soul is in reference to a spiritual experience of life and death. This reiterates what I shared earlier about Islam teaching us that one concept can take both a spiritual and physical form. The physical body experiences both physical life and death. And the spiritual body (the *ruh)* experiences spiritual forms of life and death. So, each body experiences life and death differently.

So what does it mean for our *ruh* to be alive? And, how do we explain the *spiritual form* of death experienced by the soul if it exists eternally and was given no expiration date? To answer these questions, we have to dive more deeply into understanding the experience of *life* and *death* for the soul, essentially life and death in their spiritual forms.

The Life & Death of The *Ruh*

To understand life, we have to first understand death. If you look up the word "death," you will see that one of the main ways death is defined is as the moment when vital processes and functioning within the body cease to exist, or when there is a permanent loss of functioning in the *systems* within the body. This truth, though, does not just apply to the physical body, but also the spiritual body. Death is essentially the experience of both the spiritual body and the physical body when either is *disconnected* or cut off from what it needs to be nourished, and what it needs to *function.*

The physical body cannot live if it is cut off from oxygen or food. And the physical systems within the body are what contribute to the physical body being able to benefit from oxygen and food. For example, damage to the respiratory system can prevent someone from breathing, and damage to the digestive system can prevent someone from eating. Either damage causes the body to be cut off from its God-designed nourishment and to inevitably experience a physical death, where it no longer functions and will no longer exist. Similarly, the spiritual body's nourishment is a *connection* to God and all that God has prescribed for it as nourishment (worship, love, connection, and what is good – *tayyib* – and pure). And the *psycho-spiritual system* (and all its entities) is what facilitates for the spiritual body its ability to benefit from that nourishment. From this, we can conclude that death is a form of disconnect, and life is a form of connection.

Knowing this, it is not a coincidence that Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) teaches us that "*sleep is the brother of death,*"[78] and scholars often refer to it as the minor form of death. Sleep, at its core, is an experience of disconnect. When we sleep, we disconnect from the world around us, from people, from our environment, from light, noise, and physical functioning. When we sleep, we shut our eyes, so we become disconnected from the ability to see something physically with our eyes. When we sleep, we rest our body, so we are disconnected temporarily from the function of walking, touching, talking, and doing. It is not that we may not be doing these things while sleeping, but we are disconnected from them. For example, a person may talk, move, touch things, or even walk around while they are sleeping, and be totally disconnected from that reality. They will often wake up not recalling they did those things because they were disconnected from it. Sleep disconnects us from the reality of our immediate surroundings, just as death disconnects us from the realities of this world. The main difference is that sleep is a disconnect that is temporary, whereas physical death is a disconnect that is permanent.

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78 *Al-Mu'jam al-Awsat,* 938.

Sleep can also be compared to death in the fact that it is an experience in which the *ruh* leaves the body. This is reflected in the Qur'an, where God says: "*It is He (God), Who takes your souls by night (when you are asleep), and has knowledge of all that you have done by day, then he raises (wakes) you up again that a term appointed (your life period) be fulfilled, then in the end unto Him will be your return. Then He will inform you what you used to do*" (6:60). In this verse, God is teaching us that our soul leaves the physical body not only when we die, but when we sleep. And it is He who calls it back to its home temporarily during sleep, and permanently when its time on earth is completed. We learn from this that the disconnect or *absence* of the soul from the body either reflects sleep or physical death, while the connection and *presence* of the soul (or *ruh*) with the body either reflects awakening (or revival) or physical life.

So, since the *ruh* does not experience physical death, its death and life are in the form of sleep and awakening. This answers the questions I asked earlier– *What does it mean for our ruh to be alive?* and *How do we explain the spiritual form of death experienced by the soul if it exists eternally and was given no expiration date?* Sleep demonstrates to us how something that is living can experience a form of disconnection. Therefore, the spiritual form of death for the *ruh*, is the experience of feeling asleep. And the spiritual form of life for the *ruh*, is an experience of being awakened.

It is through sleep, that we know the power of being awake, for we as human beings learn things through opposites. For example, we deeply understand the importance of light and day, because we have witnessed its opposite: darkness and night. Similarly, we know the power of our souls being revived, awakened and alive, when we have witnessed its opposite: the soul being disconnected, asleep, and spiritually dead.

The priority of a Muslim is to not journey through this temporary world in a state of sleep, where we are not only disconnected from the present reality God put infront of us, but also disconnected and not awakened to the reality of the eternal life to come. When death comes, every soul has no choice but to be awakened to the reality (*haqq*) of the realm it must inevitably return to. The key is to live awakened before death abruptly wakes us up.

> "*This place is a dream. Only a sleeper considers it real. Then death comes like dawn, and you wake up laughing at what you thought was your grief.*"[79] — Rumi

Many people today are currently experiencing the physical form of life but not the spiritual form of life, where their physical body is nourished, awake, and living, while their spiritual body lacks nourishment and therefore is in

79 Rumi (1997).

a state of sleep. I have witnessed this truth many times in my clinical work. Clients have said statements like, "I don't feel alive," or "Everything is going great, but I feel numb," "I feel like I am just going through the motions (or sleep-walking through life)" or "I feel like a zombie," to express the feeling of not being connected to their life and the experience of living. This again reiterates that life and death is rooted in connection and disconnection.

The soul, despite having eternal life that goes beyond this world, can experience a death (or a state of sleep) when it is not connected to what it needs. And just like the physical body depends on various physical systems within it to receive what it needs, the spiritual body also depends primarily on a specific system to get what it needs to feel nourished and awakened, and this is the *psycho-spiritual system.* The facets (or organs) within the psycho-spiritual system are designed to facilitate the soul's connection to what it needs. If any of these facets, especially the heart, fails to function according to its God-given design, the spiritual body faces a risk of death.

When the *psycho-spiritual system* is not healthy, aligned, and no longer functioning effectively in the way it was designed, the soul experiences the spiritual form of death, an experience in which we feel asleep and disconnected from the reality of living, the reality of where we came from, and the reality of where we return to. And this should concern us greatly. We should be concerned about the life and death of our *ruh* as we are concerned about the life and death of our physical body. In fact, we should care more, because the *ruh* is who we are at our core, and is the part of us that is designed to live in an eternal place, whereas the body is designed to live in a place that God taught us won't last forever.

So, just as the health of our physical organs lead to the life of the physical body, the health of our psycho-spiritual organs lead to the life of the spiritual body. And we should care for our psycho-spiritual system as we care for any physical system in our body, for we do not want to walk our journey in this world with a physical body that is alive but a spiritual body that is dead.

> "*I learned that every mortal will taste death. But only some will taste life.*"[80] — Rumi

The Relationship Between The *Ruh* & Heart

There is a mutual and two-way relationship between the spiritual body (or *ruh)* and the heart. We can understand this more clearly simply by looking at the relationship between the physical body and any of its central organs. For instance, if our physical heart fails to function, we understand that the physical

80 The Spiritual Life (n.d.).

body risks death. And if the physical body dies for any reason, the physical heart (even if it was healthy and not a contributing factor to the death of the physical body) will still cease to function and start to shut down. Similarly, the death of the spiritual body leads to the heart's malfunctioning, and the malfunctioning of the heart (or any facet within the *psycho-spiritual system*) puts the spiritual body at risk to die.

The heart in relation to the spiritual body can also be compared to the lung in relation to the physical body. The physical body cannot receive air if the lungs are not working or there is something else within the body blocking them from air. The lungs are one of the central organs that plays a role in the body having access to its main food supply, which is oxygen. For the spiritual body, the heart is that central organ that plays the greatest role in giving the spiritual body (the *ruh*) access to its "oxygen" while it journeys through this world. And the mind or ego (if not aligned and cared for properly) can play a role in creating psychological and spiritual barriers or blockages that can prevent the heart from receiving the nourishment it needs to feed our soul and entire being.

The H.O.M.E. Method teaches that the liberation, peace, light, and life of our souls is impacted by the condition of our heart. I learned about this relationship between the soul and the condition of the heart from the Qur'an. The Qur'an teaches us that the condition in which a soul returns back to God, reflects the state of our heart. On the day of judgment, it will be the souls of those who brought back to God a "*sound or whole heart,*" who will have succeeded in the hereafter. This is reflected in the following verse: "*...that day wealth and children will be of no benefit (to a person) except the one who comes to Allah (God) with a sound heart (qalbin saleem)*" (Qur'an, 26:88-89).

The word *saleem* in Arabic is a word used to describe something that is put together, completed, sound, pure, and whole. From this verse, we learn that our soul's success in the next realm is not dependent on what we own, our material blessings, the perfection of our physical bodies, or the people that God gives us in our lives, even our own children. Rather, true spiritual success is coming back to the One who created us with a heart that is attached to Him, complete through Him, whole through Him, and not dependent on anything temporary or material for its worth. In essence, a sound heart (*qalbin saleem*) is a heart that realizes that its wholeness depends on its Creator, the Most Perfect and Most Complete, and as a result has freed itself from the shackles of what is *created* and ultimately belongs to the Creator. Only then can our soul thrive in this world as well as in the next. So, again, there is a mutual and two-way relationship between the heart and the *ruh*. They both feed off each other and need each other.

The *ruh* needs the heart. The *ruh*'s condition in this world and the next is impacted by what the heart presents to it. The way we treat our hearts in this world either gives the soul a taste of its home, or it estranges it from its home, leaving it unsettled, agitated, and lacking nourishment, as we journey through this human experience trying to force it to be at home in a world it knows it doesn't belong to. For the *ruh* to thrive and be at peace in this world and the next, the heart must be the lead, and its health and nourishment must be prioritized.

The heart needs the *ruh*. The *ruh* gets its light directly from God, and the heart needs to be in service of the *ruh* to receive this light. To help you understand this specific point of the heart's need for the *ruh*, I will direct your attention to the solar system. In fact, throughout this book, I will refer to the solar system very frequently, for it played a crucial role in helping me greatly understand my own inner world and consequently develop the H.O.M.E. Method.

In the *psycho-spiritual system*, the heart can be compared to the moon, the spiritual body (the *ruh*) can be compared to the sun, and – for the sake of this specific example – the earth can be compared to our physical body. After all, the physical body is earthly. It comes from the soil of the earth and returns to the soil of the earth. In the solar system, the sun is the central entity around which the planets revolve. Amongst those planets is earth, the physical world we live in. As the earth orbits around the sun, the earth itself has a magnificent entity rotating around it every 28 days, and that is the moon. The moon orbits the earth as the earth orbits the sun, and as they both move around the sun in their own orbit, they receive light from it. The light the moon provides earth is from the sun, for the moon is an object of reflection, not the object of light itself. Depending on the position of the moon in relation to the sun, the moon receives different levels of light from the sun. This is why we witness different phases of the moon throughout the month. It is dependent on the position of the moon and how much light it receives in each position. Sometimes, it is in a position where the light it receives from the sun is so little that we only see an almost unnoticeable sliver of light when we look at the moon. We call this phase the new moon. Sometimes we see a little more and this phase of the moon is called a waxing crescent moon. When the moon is almost full, this phase is called the waxing gibbous moon. When the moon once again returns to its position directly opposite of the sun, and as a result becomes fully lighted, it enters the phase we call the full moon. This is the time each month when the moon is directly facing the sun and receives all its light. When this happens, the full moon becomes this great light in earth's dark sky, illuminating everything in its presence.

In the H.O.M.E. Method's Psycho-Spiritual Model, the heart, *like* the moon, is the object of reflection, and the *ruh*, like the sun, is the object of light. Just like the sun and moon, they both are creations of God and He is the Source of the light that both the sun and *ruh* receive. Just like the moon reflects back the light from the sun, the heart, being like a mirror, reflects back the light from the *ruh*, but only when the heart is aligned and positioned opposite of the *ruh*, can the *heart* fully reflect the light of the *ruh*. When this happens, when the *heart* is nourished so fully by the light that God has given the *ruh*, can it be awakened to illuminate everything else in its presence. Even our physical body benefits from this illumination, just as the earth benefits from the illumination of the moon, and we start to feel like we are not just living, but we feel alive and awakened within our being. This is what it means to live from our souls: the heart becomes aligned and in harmony with the *ruh*.

We know that scientifically, without the sun, the earth would not be able to sustain life. But what many do not know is that the earth also would not be able to sustain life without the moon. The moon actually facilitates many functions for the earth to be a livable and stable home for its creatures. The moon moderates the planet's position on its axis, which contributes to the stability of its climate. The moon and its position relevant to the earth impacts the tides, and the changing of the tides of the ocean is necessary for the natural rhythm of the earth. Scientists say that this rhythm is what has helped guide many travelers for thousands of years. The heart, like the moon, also has a rhythm. And its rhythm provides us with guidance that we should not minimize. It tells us when we are at peace, when we are aligned, when we are nourished, full, or when it is void of nourishment, peace, and alignment. The heart is designed to know right from wrong, and is also designed to guide our travel through this world. As Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us: "*Consult your heart. Righteousness is that about which the soul feels at ease and the heart feels tranquil. And wrongdoing is that which wavers in the soul and causes uneasiness in the chest, even though people have repeatedly given their legal opinion (in its favour).*"[81] This hadith beautifully reflects how the soul's ease and the heart's tranquility are connected, and we can conclude from it that if we engage in righteousness, behaviors that are in line with the soul and its needs, then the heart experiences more peace.

The heart is a powerful entity within our being. It illuminates our being when it is aligned with the *ruh*, this higher self we are designed to live from. But just like the moon, the heart's light and fullness depends on its position. The heart, like a mirror, will reflect back what we position it to face. If we face it towards our *nafs* (our lower self) and all that our *nafs* desires, the heart

81 Hadith 27, 40 Hadith an-Nawawi.

will begin to reflect the values of the *nafs*, and those values will be expressed outwardly through our behaviors. If we face the heart towards our higher self, the *ruh*, it will reflect the values of the *ruh*, and be nourished by God's light.

The heart's nature is to constantly flip. Its position is not permanently set, but rather dependent on how we position it in each moment and day. The word for heart in Arabic is *qalb*, which is the noun form of the adjective word "*muqalib*," which means something that easily flips. The heart's nature is to move in the direction of what we worship or identify as our highest value. For the heart to be positioned to receive the light of the *ruh*, it has to turn to God, prioritize Him above anything else, and seek Him for its nourishment and purification. Obedience to our *nafs* (or ego) or our desires only imprisons our heart, leaving it disconnected from what it needs to thrive and be nourished. But obedience to God frees our heart and opens it up to receive exactly what it needs to experience: true inner peace and nourishment.

> You become freer internally
> when obedience to God
> becomes your greatest
> concern and enjoyment.[82]

Comparing the heart to the moon is a choice that felt so right in my heart as I was developing the H.O.M.E Method, but it wasn't until I was completing this book and showing the H.O.M.E. Model to a mentor of mine, that, upon seeing the Model, told me this was consistent with an actual *hadith* in which Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) himself compares the heart to the moon. I had never heard of this *hadith*. So, when my mentor shared this with me, I was filled with so much joy and gratitude, for the timing couldn't have been more perfect. I felt that God was giving me another sign that this method is under His guidance. The *hadith* my mentor shared was the following: "*The Prophet (ﷺ) said: 'There is not a heart from the hearts except it has clouds like the clouds of the moon. If the clouds cover the moon when it is shining, it turns dark and when it goes away it appears.*"[83]

In this *hadith*, the Prophet (ﷺ) is teaching us that the heart can only light our being when it is not covered, just like the moon cannot fully illuminate the dark night if it is covered by clouds. This is in line with what the H.O.M.E. Method's Psycho-Spiritual Model aims to teach, which is that if the heart is covered, it can't reflect back the light of the *ruh* – just like the moon, if covered, can't reflect back to the earth the light of the sun. According to the H.O.M.E. Model, this covering happens when we are led by the *nafs*. The heart's "clouds"

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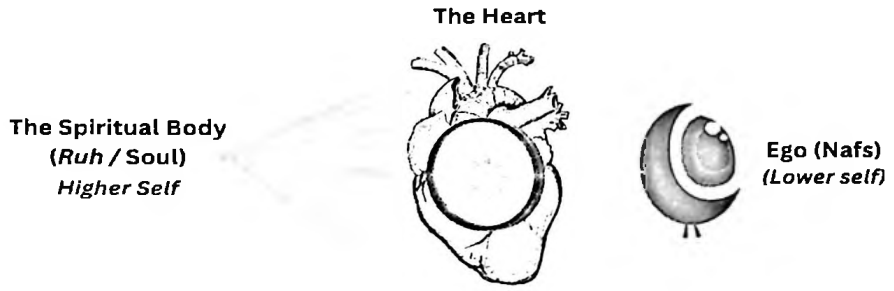
82 Poem by the author.

83 *Sahīh Jami*, 5682.

are the *nafs* and what it calls us to. But, if the heart prioritizes and submits to God as beautifully as the moon does, negates any other idol but Him, the heart becomes unveiled, like a polished mirror fully reflecting God's light, and as a result, our whole being becomes awakened by this light, as our heart becomes aligned with our true nature and higher and eternal self, the *ruh*.

The Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method's Psycho-Spiritual Model (Figure 2)



The H.O.M.E. Method's Psycho-Spiritual Model is designed to empower you to be watchful over where you face your heart each day, for we either can choose to face it towards our lower self or our higher self. To turn it toward the right direction, we need God's help, and why we should always ask God, "*Oh turner of hearts, set our hearts firm upon your way.*"[84] God is our Greatest Helper on the path of aligning our hearts with our higher self. But we can't ask God for help and not do the work ourselves. When we do not work hard to take care of our heart, how we nourish it, and where we position it, the *ruh* becomes cut off. Remember, the heart is the object of reflection. It is like a mirror, so while it receives its light from the *ruh*, it needs to reflect back that light so that the *ruh* is at peace. If many of our days are spent positioning the heart to face our lower self, it doesn't become polished. The mirror or reflective space of the heart becomes covered and will no longer be able to reflect light back to the *ruh*.

"*As You Live Deeper in the Heart, the Mirror gets clearer and cleaner.*"[85]
— Rumi

84 *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 3522.

85 Rumi (2001).

The heart needs to prioritize God and His prescriptions, so that it may become the polished mirror worthy of the light from the *ruh*. The *ruh* then can feed off that light reflected back to it by the heart, and it can thrive in this world and be at peace, as it journeys back to its original home.

"*Verily, everything has a polish and the polish of the heart is the remembrance of Allah (God) Almighty.*" — Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ)[86]

The *ruh* longs to see God's light in this world as it journeys back to Him. If it looks to the heart and sees darkness instead of light – due to the heart being tainted with the negative effects of the *nafs* – the *ruh* becomes disturbed. When this happens, even our physical body becomes impacted, for our physical body needs the heart and the *ruh* to be aligned. The physical body would not have life without the element of life that God has placed within it and that is the *ruh*. But even if the physical body contains the *ruh* and is living, we do not actually feel *alive* if the heart is not aligned with the *ruh* and reflecting its light. The heart cannot illuminate our being if it is not consistently polished to be a clear mirror that can easily reflect the light it receives from the *ruh*. This is why *tazkiyah* is so important.

Tazkiyah, the Islamic practice of purifying our hearts, is what allows the heart to be a clear mirror that can easily reflect the light that God provides the *ruh* with. Through the practice of *tazkiyah*, the heart becomes aligned with the *ruh* and receives the nourishment it needs to illuminate our being. And as the sun's light allows the moon to illuminate the earth when it needs it most, in the darkness, the *ruh*'s light (the *nur* that only comes from God), is what allows the heart to illuminate our entire being when we need it most, as we journey through this lower world, which is called in Islam the *dunya*. The meaning of *dunya* is something that is lower and closer to us. And this is the word used in the Qur'an to describe this temporary world our soul is passing through: "*You desire the fleeting goods of this world (al-dunya), while Allah (God) desires (for you) the Hereafter (al-akhirah)*" (Qur'an, 8:67)

There is an understanding in Islamic teachings that there is a higher world and a lower world. Unlike this world, the hereafter (or *akhira* in Arabic) is the eternal, permanent, and higher world. It is the opposite of *dunya*. It is *'ulya*, which means something that is high and lofty. The hereafter is the higher world where our higher self (the *ruh*) comes from, while this is the lower world where our lower self (the *nafs*) lives and dies. We can compare the night to this lower world, and the day to the higher world. Where the soul is from, the higher unseen world, everything is brightly illuminated just like the day before the night. But this lower and seen world is like the night, as we are no longer

86 *Shu'ab al-Imān*, 503.

in that illuminated spiritual world, and therefore, we need the *ruh* to be our means and connection to that illumination. And the only way to experience that inner illumination in this lowly and nightly world is to let our *ruh* rise, just as we can only experience external illumination – the daytime – when the sun rises. If we neglect the *ruh*, it starts to set just like the sun, and when it sets, so does its light, and our inner world becomes dark, just like the night. For both the sun and the *ruh* to rise and illuminate their respective worlds, depends on their submission to the One who created them, the One who has named Himself *Al-Nur*, the Light of the heavens and the earth,[87] and the Source of *All* Light.

The universe is already in submission to God. The sky. The stars. The sun. The mountains. The moon. They all surrender to Him so magnificently. And it is their *submission* that we are witnessing when we are standing there in awe of their beauty. When the sun rises and illuminates the earth or when it sets each day, it is obeying a command. When the moon reflects the light of the sun back to the earth and illuminates the dark night sky, it is submitting to what God created it to do. In any moment that our heart is overwhelmed by the beauty of nature and the world God created, we are in actuality overwhelmed by the fact that we are beholding the act of submission, surrendering, and obedience right in front of our eyes. That is what makes something so immensely beautiful. That is what overwhelms the heart. Nothing is as beautiful as witnessing *Islam* in action. And it is through the Islam of the universe, that we are shown and reminded of the immense beauty and magnificence we can also possess when we follow their example. But unlike the universe and angels which do not have free will, *we* chose free will, and therefore, we are responsible for making the choice to submit to God just as the universe does. If we decide to submit fully to God as we are commanded to, the *ruh* is able to access *Al-Nur* and the heart is then able to receive the light it needs to illuminate our being, just as the moon illuminates the earth. As a result, our heart becomes nourished, alive, awakened, and whole in this world and returns to God nourished, alive, and whole (or *saleem*) in the next world. But when we resist to submit to God or deny His existence completely, our soul becomes cut off from the Source of light, and the heart becomes cut off from the light it needs to become nourished, awakened, and alive.In the end, our entire being becomes void of light. In a spiritual sense, the *ruh* dies and subsequently the heart fails to function.

87 Qur'an, 24:35

The *Psycho-Spiritual System*: Its Purpose, Entities, & Functions

There is a world within you that is truly marvelous, miraculous, beautiful, and powerful. It is an entire system of its own that is equipped with the most important tools you need to navigate this journey you are on in this world. It is the system that God fashioned beautifully for you to help you connect and interact with your experiences in this world, to think about them, to interpret them, to feel them, and to choose how to react to them through your actions and behaviors. This system is what is defined as your *psycho-spiritual system*, and is a key aspect of the Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method.

"*We will show them Our Signs in the universe, and in their own selves...*" (Qur'an, 41:53)

Amongst all the systems that exist within you, from your cardiovascular system that keeps your heart pumping blood to the rest of your body, to your respiratory system that helps you keep breathing that good oxygen, I believe your psycho-spiritual system is equally important, if not more powerful than any other physical system that we prioritize in this world. The term *psycho-spiritual system* was developed to emphasize that our being contains a psychological and spiritual system that we have to value to understand, just as we do with physical and biological systems within our being.

If we look around, we will see that the universe consists of systems. From space to earth and all that exists within our world, there are various systems that make up the greater body or world they exist in. In space, we have the solar systems within the various galaxies. Earth is a part of the solar system that exists within the Milky Way galaxy, and this system consists of the planets, the sun, and the moon. On earth, we have various ecosystems that make up different geographical bodies and the organisms within that body that interact with each other and the environment they exist in. Within our physical body, we have different systems that are responsible for the various functions of the physical body. We have systems all around us that help us understand the world and greater universe, and all the functions that exist within it. And above all, all these systems and their entities impact each other. Everything is connected. If we look at the world around us and its systems, we can see this truth evidently.

There are two creations of God that I love deeply and they are the ocean and the moon (especially a full moon). They always captivated my heart in a way nothing else in nature did. And they always pointed my heart to the greatness of God, His magnificence, His art, and His love for us. But little did I know that all these years of spending countless moments of my life connecting with and loving the moon and the ocean separately that they were not very separate

at all. They are connected, and when I learned this, I was in awe. How could they be in completely different systems and be connected? The ocean exists within a system in our world called the hydrosphere system, which is the system that makes up all the water that exists on earth, and the moon exists within our solar system which is made up of the eight planets, their moons, and their orbit around the sun. But despite the ocean and the moon existing in completely different systems, they impact each other. The connection they have is that the moon's position impacts the tides of the ocean. The moon has a great gravity that pulls the earth closer to it, and so depending on the moon's position, the ocean experiences high and low tides due to this pull of the moon. This is just one example of how systems in our external world can be connected and can have an impact on each other. The same is true for systems that exist internally within our being, especially our psycho-spiritual system. The health of our *psycho-spiritual system* (or lack of) can impact other systems within our being.

Your *psycho-spiritual system* impacts every other system in your body. How you think, feel, interpret your experiences, and behave, impact everything else. A lack of alignment within this system ends up burdening other systems within our being. In fact, we know from the medical world that many physical illnesses and issues are related to a person's emotional well-being. And there are many medical issues that couldn't be explained through solely a physical lens, and point the individual to address unresolved psychological issues and stressors. Physical health issues like heart disease, high blood pressure, heart attacks, obesity, and even illnesses like fibromyalgia, are very much associated with emotional stressors. Medical research reports that about 90 percent of physical illnesses are in fact related to emotional stress.[88] The medical world knows just how powerfully psychological distress can impact a person's physical health.

This emphasizes again that, everything is connected, and every system has an impact on other systems outside of it. If the ocean can be affected by the moon, then our physical body and its systems – and even the world outside of us and its systems – can be impacted by our psycho-spiritual system, and vice versa. The health and alignment of our inner world promotes greater alignment in other systems we interact with. Therefore, it becomes crucial that we understand this great inner world, this psycho-spiritual system and all the powerful tools contained within.

Every system that exists in our universe serves a purpose and is made up of certain entities and functions that make up each system, but also contains a certain flow and organization that promotes the well-being of that system and allows the body or world it exists within to fulfill its purpose as well.

88 Salleh, M. R. (2008).

Therefore, when studying any system, it is important to know three key pieces of information: 1) the purpose of the system, 2) the entities that make up the system, and 3) the organization (or flow) needed within that system for it to thrive. We cannot truly understand any system if one of these three pieces of information is missing. For example, the digestive system not only contains certain organs that make up that system, but there is a specific flow within that system that is required in order for that system to function the way it was created to. Therefore, those studying physical anatomy do not just learn the purpose of the digestive system and its entities (i.e, the esophagus, stomach, large intestine, small intestine, etc.), but they must also study the flow in which food needs to be digested for the system to fulfill its purpose and contribute to the health of the greater physical body. Likewise, in order to thoroughly study the psycho-spiritual system, we have to understand first and foremost its purpose, its entities, and then the specific organization and flow of the system that allows it to fulfill its purpose and contribute to the health of the greater spiritual body.

The Purpose of The Psycho-Spiritual system

Every system that exists in our external and internal world serves a purpose. And we cannot truly understand a system and its power, without first understanding the purpose it was created for. The universal purpose that all systems share is to serve the harmony, stability, and life of the greater world or body it exists in. The solar system serves the harmony and stability of the galaxy it exists within. The various ecosystems maintain the harmony, stability, and life of the earth's geographical bodies and the interactions between the organisms (plants, animals, and humans) existing within it. All anatomical systems – the digestive system, respiratory system, cardiovascular system, circulatory system – function to maintain the harmony, stability, and life of the physical body. Therefore, prioritizing the healthy functioning of each of these systems is crucial to maintain the balance, harmony, peace, and life of the external body or world it exists within.

God created the great universe to contain various worlds, with each world containing their own systems designed to maintain the balance and security of that world. This is reflective of who God is, and one of His Divine Names, *As-Salam*, which means the Source of All Peace. God created everything with balance. Even through His attributes and names taught to us through the Qur'an, we can easily see that there is balance in who God is, and how He expresses Himself to us. For example, He is *Al-Basit*, the One who gives abundantly, but He is also *Al-Qabid*, the One who withholds and constricts. Both attributes serve a great purpose of balance in our life and in His creation,

but they also serve our benefit. And so, if the Creator embodies balance, then it makes complete sense that everything He would create, from the galaxies in space to the tiniest system existing within a cell in our body, is created with balance and harmony as well.

It was recognizing and reflecting upon these truths that led my heart to deeply recognize the need for me to explore what I now define as the *psycho-spiritual system* and how important it is for us to understand its purpose, which is to serve the harmony, stability, and life of the spiritual body. The psycho-spiritual system is there to allow for the spiritual body to fulfill its greater purpose in this world. If the psycho-spiritual system is not aligned, then the spiritual body cannot thrive to fulfill its purpose, and if the spiritual body is not healthy, the health of our physical body and all its systems also becomes impacted as well.

The Psycho-Spiritual System Entities

The Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method recognizes that there are 6 parts that make up the psycho-spiritual system: 3 of them are entities and 3 of them are functions. The H.O.M.E. Method identifies the *Heart*, the *Mind*, and the *Ego* as the three main entities (or psychological and spiritual organs), which are what the letters "H," "M," and "E," in H.O.M.E. stand for, and it identifies *Cognition*, *Emotions*, and *Behaviors* as the three main functions of the psycho-spiritual system. This can be compared to how the respiratory system has main entities such as the lungs, windpipe, and diaphragm, but breathing itself is an experience or function of the respiratory system. Just like the respiratory system controls and guides our breathing, the psycho-spiritual system helps us control, guide, and navigate our cognition, emotions, and behaviors.

1) The Heart (*Qalb*/Higher *Aql*)

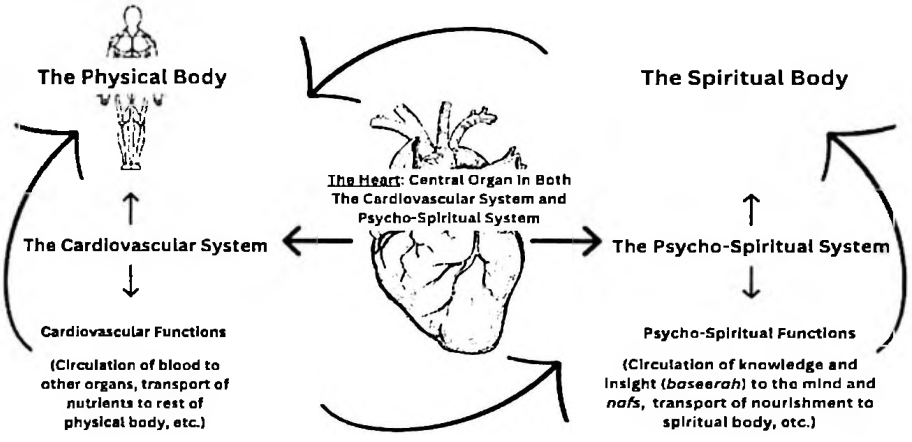
The H.O.M.E. Method identifies the heart as the central entity and leader of the psycho-spiritual system, and the part of us that possesses the highest intelligence. Islam recognizes that the heart not only has biological (physical) capabilities, but also psychological and spiritual capabilities. This is why scholars, when discussing the heart in reference to faith and spirituality, call it the *spiritual* heart, to differentiate it from the physical heart or physical capabilities of the heart.

The H.O.M.E. Method is designed to highlight and give great importance to the psychological and spiritual capabilities of the heart. Therefore, in the H.O.M.E. Model, the heart we are referring to is the *psycho-spiritual* heart, not the physical heart. This model is highlighting that the entire heart is part of two systems. The heart, and its biological or physical capabilities, is part

of the cardiovascular system and the heart, and its psychological and spiritual capabilities, is also part of what is now defined in the H.O.M.E. Method's Psycho-Spiritual Model as the psycho-spiritual system. And this is normal, for one entity to belong to two systems. In fact, in the physical body, one organ can belong to two systems, but function differently in each system. For example, the pancreas is part of both the digestive system and the endocrine system, and in each system it serves in different ways. It is the same with the heart, and the way the H.O.M.E. Method is designed to teach you to view the heart.

The heart belongs to both the *cardiovascular system* that directly serves the health of the physical body and the *psycho-spiritual system* that directly serves the health of the spiritual body. In one system, it serves biological functions and in the other it serves psychological and spiritual functions.

The Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method's Psycho-Spiritual Model (Figure 3)


The Physical Body
The Spiritual Body
The Heart: Central Organ in Both The Cardiovascular System and Psycho-Spiritual System
The Cardiovascular System
The Psycho-Spiritual System
Cardiovascular Functions
(Circulation of blood to other organs, transport of nutrients to rest of physical body, etc.)
Psycho-Spiritual Functions
(Circulation of knowledge and insight (baseerah) to the mind and nafs, transport of nourishment to spiritual body, etc.)

This is how multi-faceted God created the heart to be. He has given it the ability to serve our holistic well-being. So, if this part within is well taken care of, then the rest of the body is taken care of. And this aligns with the *hadith* that was mentioned earlier, where Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) says: "*Verily, in the body is a piece of flesh which, if sound, the entire body is sound, and if corrupt, the entire body is corrupt. Truly, it is the heart.*"[89] The truth relayed in this *hadith* applies to the heart and its biological (or physical) functions but also its psycho-spiritual functions, and their corresponding bodies that are impacted by these functions. If the physical heart is sound or corrupt, the entire physical body becomes sound or corrupt. If the *psycho-spiritual heart* is sound or corrupt, the

89 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, 52.

spiritual body is sound or corrupt. If the heart in its entirety – both biologically and psycho-spiritually – is sound, then our entire being containing both our physical body and spiritual body becomes holistically sound. Therefore, we should not just prioritize caring for the biological capabilities of the heart but also the psycho-spiritual capabilities. It is important to also note that the psycho-spiritual experience and the biological experience of the heart interact with each other. For instance, a person may experience pain within their physical heart due to psychological and spiritual challenges or difficulties. They will go to the doctor and complain of heart pain, and all the heart tests will come back showing there are no problems with the physical capabilities of the heart. The doctor then starts to wonder and ask the patient if they are struggling with anxiety or any emotional issues. This tells us that the heart has a psycho-spiritual experience that can show up as a physical experience. The opposite is also true. If your heart is not physically healthy, or you are not caring for it the right way, it can impact the psycho-spiritual experience and health of the heart. For example, it became evident that patients who experienced cardiac-related issues were at risk for developing depression and anxiety.[90] So, for the heart to be a great leader of our psycho-spiritual system, we need to care for both its biological and psycho-spiritual wellness.

Every system has a chosen leader, and in the psycho-spiritual system, it is the heart. To understand leadership further, we can look to the family system. Islam greatly emphasizes the family system, because family systems are the foundation of society. If you want to see the health of any society, look at the health of their family systems. Therefore, the health of a family system is a priority to God, for He created us and knows what best serves our individual, familial, and societal needs. In a family, God has given the leadership position to men. In the Qur'an, God has said: "*Men are caretakers (qawammun) of women, because of that through which Allah (God) has given fadl one over another, and because of what they spend of their property.*" (4:34) The Arabic word *fadl* in this verse means surplus, something additional. God has given men additional characteristics that qualify them to burden the responsibilities of leading and caring for their wives and family. This *fadl* is not given to men because women are lesser in value or do not possess magnificent qualities that make them great creations and beloved to God. This *fadl* was given to men so that they fulfill the crucial role of leader within the family system, so that the goal of a healthy system is fulfilled. Women were also given *fadl* in many ways, for we also possess additional characteristics that men do not have, and that *fadl* was given so we can fulfill a crucial role in the family system and society as a whole.

90 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.).

But when it comes to leadership of the home (being providers, protectors, etc), it was men that were given the specific *fadl* that will allow them to fulfill the role of being *qawammun*. When the man does not fulfill his God-given position of leader, the wife has no choice but to end up attempting to take on those masculine characteristics that were given to a man. For when an entity within a system fails to fulfill its role, another entity will naturally attempt to make up for that weakness to keep the system in harmony. Women do the same when they find their husbands unable to fulfill their God-given role in the family system. But in doing so, she experiences great inner distress. I have seen this many times in working with women over the years who were in relationships with men who did not prioritize God and the leadership role He chose for them in the family. These women ended up having to try to fill a role they were not designed to bear. As a result, the role they *were* designed to bear ends up being unfulfilled. These women never wanted the *fadl* given to men. They wanted to be women and to embrace the *fadl* they were given to fulfill *their* role in the family system. They wanted their men to *be* men so that they can fully embrace being women, and be who God wants them to be.

And when the husband is a great leader of the home and his family – and prioritizes and upholds his masculine duties (of being *qawammun*) to provide, protect, and care for his family – the wife does not need to be burdened with more than she was designed to bear. Men and women are different, and each is designed in a certain way to compliment each other. If men try to become like women, they will not fulfill the role they were designed to fulfill, and other people within the family structure will suffer. As I mentioned in the chapter on purpose (Chapter 4), anything utilized in a way that is not aligned with its purpose, becomes abused. If women try to become like men, they will take on more than they can bear, and not be able to embrace and fully express their femininity, which is different than masculinity, but has a great strength on its own that is needed within the spousal relationship and beneficial to the entire family health and structure. At any time, when one entity within a system tries to take on a role it was not designed to fulfill, not only does the entity itself suffers, but the entire system suffers. When each entity functions in the way it was designed, the entire system experiences greater harmony and alignment. A family is a system on its own, and every person within that system has a role. Some of these roles are already defined by God, the One who created us, and some of those roles are left to the judgment of the husband and wife. But if any person (particularly the parents) abandon their God-given roles, the consequential harms are great and they impact themselves, their children, and the family. It is not a coincidence that we have an entire theory and therapeutic approach in psychotherapy known as Family Systems theory.

We use this theory when counseling families and it helps families understand that they are part of an entire system, and within each system, every person has a role. Clarifying those roles helps a family not only understand their place in the system, but how they need to adjust and improve that role to contribute to the health and wellness of the entire system.

To understand the importance of the heart leading within the psycho-spiritual system, we can say that the man (or husband) is like the heart, the woman (or wife) is like the mind, and the children are like the *nafs*. I am not comparing the actual characteristics of the heart and mind to men and women, but just to emphasize the heart's leadership position within the system. The heart, like the man, was given the position of leader by God – in essence to be the *qawammun* over the mind as well as the *nafs* – and as a result was also given the *fadl* to fulfill that position. This *fadl* of the heart consists of the unique characteristics such as greater inner sight (*baseerah*), intellect (*aql*), and connection (*sillah*), compared to what the mind was given. (Again, I am not comparing these actual characteristics to men or implying that women do not have these characteristics. Let us focus on the actual *heart and mind* now.) The heart was given this *fadl*, not because the mind does not have magnificent qualities of its own that are essential for the health and alignment of the psycho-spiritual system, but because of the extra responsibility and role of leadership the heart was created to fulfill.

The H.O.M.E. Method's Psycho-Spiritual Model identifies the heart as the higher *aql* and the strongest facet of intellect, cognition, perception, and connection within our psycho-spiritual system. As mentioned in the previous chapter, throughout the Qur'an, God addresses our heart's cognitive and intellectual power. In the Qur'an, *aql* is mentioned in reference to the heart and its ability to possess intellect (to intellectualize) or to reason.[91] The Qur'an also mentions the heart in association with the ability to see[92], comprehend, and understand in its own way. In the Qur'an, we see that even the ability of reflection and perception is not solely limited to our brain, as Western psychology emphasizes.[93] And we would be truly deceived if we think that our brain is the only facet of ourselves that holds the power of intellect and the ability of cognition. Islam teaches us that our cognitive abilities to reason, reflect, understand, and accurately perceive ourselves, our world, and our purpose depends on the condition of our hearts and on how veiled it is. As God tells us, " ... *and their hearts were sealed over, so they do not understand*" (Qur'an, 9:87).

91 Qur'an, 22:46

92 Qur'an, 22:46

93 Qur'an, 47:24

So, while the mind is a very powerful entity within our psycho-spiritual system, its power is different and not greater than the heart's. The heart is the master of the mind and the mind is the servant of the heart.

The H.O.M.E. Method teaches that there are two types of intellect (*aql*), an intellect of the brain (or mind) and an intellect of the heart (*qalb*). Our *qalb* – that is our psycho-spiritual heart – has its own intellect and cognitive abilities, to decipher and recognize truths. But in our world today, many of us are too busy worshiping and depending solely on our brain and its rational abilities to experience and understand life, that we have made our hearts subservient to it. It is our mind that should be serving our *qalb*, for we can only succeed when our inner psycho-spiritual heart takes the lead. This is the way we were designed. And it is important to know ourselves and our design, for this understanding paves the way to our Creator.

The West has given so much power to the mind (or the rational brain) for many years, and even though there has been more attention given to the power of the heart in recent years, it is still limited in how it views the heart. That is because only God can teach us most accurately about what He has created. But what research is picking up on is that the heart has a power unlike any other. In fact, an institute dedicated to the science of the heart called *HeartMath* identified that the heart has the strongest magnetic field that exists within the human body, and not only reaches every cell within the body, but also reaches outside of the body into the external space surrounding us. *HeartMath* identified through their research that the heart's magnetic field can be identified to extend several feet away from our body, and that this magnetic field is a key transporter of information.[94] This powerful finding in their research reflects why *tazkiyah* is such a central practice within Islam, because if the heart is not purified, it cannot soundly guide how we think, feel, behave, and interact with the world outside of us. In essence, it impacts the energy and direction of the heart, and its ability to lead.

The psycho-spiritual heart, when it expresses true and sound leadership, has the ability to guide and lead the mind as well as provide it with the necessary information it needs to think and process in service of our higher self (the *ruh*), but only if the mind is its dutiful servant. If we give the mind the lead, the heart will blindly follow every thought, or will be led by every emotion that thought produces, and our behaviors will reflect that. But if the heart is the lead, and the mind is a dutiful servant, the heart will filter that mental and emotional information first through its own faculties of intelligence, and that is what will shape our behaviors and actions. In the end, our behaviors transform, because what we actually do becomes driven by the *beliefs* that the

94 McCraty, R. (2016).

heart has formed around what the mind gives it. But unfortunately, the heart's role in shaping our behaviors is missing from Western psychological theories such as Cognitive Behavioral psychology, that centers all abilities of cognition around the mind.

But Islam teaches us that the heart is the strongest psycho-spiritual tool of cognition and intellect we have to interpret and derive meaning and wisdom from our experiences, to understand what the mind cannot help us understand, see what our egos may block us from seeing, and to direct our emotions and behaviors in a more powerful way than any other tool within us. It is the only part of us that is worthy of the position of leader within our being, and if we give that position to anything else, we will experience great misalignment, chaos, and struggle.

The H.O.M.E. Method views the heart to be the equivalent of a compass. If an actual compass is working right, its magnet will point us in the direction of the magnetic field of the earth. If it is not working right, it will direct you outside of the accurate direction of the magnetic field. Similarly, if the heart is functioning in a way it was designed, its "magnet" will point us in the direction of the magnetic field of the *ruh* and its direction to God and all that serves its nourishment. If the heart is not functioning in a way that it was designed, then the heart's magnetic energy will extend and direct us to areas that do not serve our souls and its direction to God.

The direction of the magnetic field of the earth is from the southern hemisphere to the northern hemisphere, and the direction of the magnetic field of the *ruh* is from this lower world to the higher world, essentially from this human world (the *dunya*) to the next world (the hereafter or *akhira*). Islam teaches us that this world, this human experience, is the inferior world, the world that is not permanent, and much lesser in value than the world to come, the higher world (the world that is *'luya*) in which our soul came from and returns to. As Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us: "*What is the parable of this worldly life (the dunya), in comparison to the Hereafter (the akhira), but one of you dipping his finger in the sea? Let him see what he brings forth.*"[95]

This lower world, despite its greatness, vastness, beauty, and diversity, is insignificant compared to the next world. God created us for this higher world, and the eternal, lofty, and perfect place that exists within it: *jannah.* He wants that perfect world for us. He views us as too valuable to stay forever in such a lower world, when He knows He has a world much greater in value to offer us and for us to benefit from. And that world is so great that it can't be short lived. He wants us to enjoy it forever. But while we are here in this lower world for some time, He gave each of us the greatest map (or guide) and the greatest

95 *Sahīh Muslim,* 2858.

navigation tool to journey back to Him in the most beautiful, wholesome, and honored way. This greatest of maps and guides is Islam, and this greatest of navigation tools is the heart. Through them both, we have the power to cultivate a higher world within despite journeying through a lower world. As we follow the sacred guidance that God's map offers us, and as we align our heart with the values and needs of the *ruh*, we have the potential and ability to live and vibrate *from* a higher place despite living *in* a lower place. And this is the power of Islam: it equips us with great strength by teaching us that the place where we live *from* (the internal world within our being) is much more important and powerful than the place in which we live *in* (our external surroundings). It gives us the ability to find rest, elevation, and strength within as we journey from the temporary, ever-changing, and at times challenging waves of the *dunya* to our final abode in the *akhira*. Above all, Islam points us to the great power and intelligence that God gave each of our hearts, to find its right way home. Just like the compass is a navigation tool designed to help us find our way from one place to another, our heart is the greatest navigation tool designed to help us find our way to the higher and spiritual world we came from and its Creator. For God would never create us, put us in this temporary world, and leave us to ourselves, without a superior navigation system to find Him, connect to Him, and benefit from Him.

Just like the compass is designed to point us north, the heart is designed to point us to God and the greater and higher world He created for us. But for a compass to direct us north, the magnet within the compass has to be working right, so it can be pulled in the right direction by the magnetic field of the earth. Similarly, as previously mentioned, the heart is like a magnet that is designed to be pulled towards God and all that serves the soul. And there is nothing that can sustain the great pull and longing within the heart like the One who created it. For everything has its designated direction, and if that direction is altered, there would be chaos. For example, in space, the planets have a designated direction, and that is in a flawless orbit around the sun, and they continuously move in that direction, though they are not supported or held up by any pillars. They do not fall. They do not crash. And that is because the sun has the strongest gravitational pull that keeps the planets in orbit around it. If the planets went in any other direction, or revolved around anything else, they would fall, and there would be chaos in space. Within this is a great sign from God that we should reflect upon.

Our hearts were created to center around God, just as the planets were created to center around the sun. We were created to seek Him, love Him, depend on Him, and worship Him, and in each of our hearts, He placed a longing for Him. There is a pull in each of us driving us to search for something

higher than ourselves. This pull is so powerful and strong that we have no choice but to look for its Source. This pull is what made Prophet Ibrahim – in a time when people, including his own father, were worshiping statues – retreat and long for something greater. It is this pull within the heart that directed Ibrahim to look to the moon and say, *"This is my lord!"* only to find that when the moon disappeared, the pull and longing within him was still ever so present, for the moon could not sustain his longing. His heart was not satisfied, for it did not find the designated True North and Source of the pull within his heart. This dissatisfaction made him then look to the sun and once again say, *"this is my lord!"*, but the sun also disappeared, and that strong pull was still there. He was then awakened to the great truth that neither the sun nor the moon, nor anything that he can witness with any of his human senses could possibly be the source of such a strong pull within his heart. The truth that only God, The Creator of the moon, the sun, the heavens and the earth could be his true Lord, settled into his heart, and he then proclaimed, *"O my people, indeed I am free from what you associate with Allah (God)"* (Qur'an, 6:77-78).

Everything in the heavens and the earth points to God, and that includes our heart. But if the heart is malfunctioning, or not properly cared for, it will point us in the wrong direction, and we will find ourselves constantly going in the directions that waste our time, our potential, our gifts, our blessings, or worse, revolving ourselves around things that only produce chaos for us. And only through trial and error, can we understand that if we revolve our life around anything else, that thing will never be able to sustain this pull within us. And we, too, like the planets, will fall and crash.

> "*Truly in the heart there is a void that cannot be removed except with the company of God. And in it there is sadness that cannot be removed except with the happiness of knowing God and being true to him, and in it there is emptiness that cannot be filled except with the love for Him and by turning to Him and always remembering Him. And if a person were given all of the world and what is in it, it would not fill this emptiness.*"[96] – Ibn Al-Qayyim Al Jawziyyah

2) The Mind (Lower *Aql* or Intellect)

The H.O.M.E. Method's Psycho-Spiritual Model identifies the mind to be the lower *aql* or intellect. While the mind is a magnificent and powerful tool of cognition, that scientists continue to attempt to understand even today, it is not designed to be the leader of our being. A system can only have one central point, or leader, or else there will be chaos. Therefore, in the psycho-spiritual system, the mind – despite being very powerful – cannot be the leader, for

96 *Madārij al-Sālikīn*, 3/156.

that is the rightful position of the heart, and not a position God created the mind to bear.

The mind, like the heart, is also responsible for both biological functions and psycho-spiritual functions, and therefore exists in more than one system. The mind (or the brain) is part of both the nervous system, where it serves various biological functions, and is also part of the *psycho-spiritual system* now defined in the H.O.M.E. Method, where it serves psychological and spiritual functions. The Western definition of the brain and its role in the nervous system is that the brain is an organ that controls thought, emotion, memory, motor skills, vision, breathing, hunger, temperature, touch, and essentially every function that regulates our body. From this definition, you can see that the functions of the brain within the nervous system are comprised of both biological and psychological functions. The H.O.M.E. Psycho-Spiritual Model wants to separate the psycho-spiritual functions from the biological functions and place the psycho-spiritual functions of the brain within the psycho-spiritual system, in order to prioritize the psycho-spiritual experience and role of the mind. So, just like the biological functions of the heart make up the cardiovascular system and its psychological and spiritual functions make up the psycho-spiritual system, the mind will be organized in the same way.

The H.O.M.E. Method identifies the mind's (or brain's) biological and physical functions of touch, motor skills, vision, breathing, temperature, hunger, and various processes that regulate the functions of the body, to be part of the nervous system. We can call this aspect of the brain, "the biological mind," the part of the brain that is responsible for all the capabilities that facilitate our physical and biological functions. The H.O.M.E. Method then identifies the mind's psycho-spiritual functions of collecting information, thinking, processing information, memory, and all the processes that allow us to understand, comprehend, reason, and intellectualize what we learn to be functions specific to the psycho-spiritual system. Within the H.O.M.E. Method's Psycho-Spiritual Model, the mind we are referring to in the psycho-spiritual system, is the *psycho-spiritual mind*, the part of the brain that is responsible for all the capabilities (conscious and unconscious) that facilitate our psychological and spiritual experience. In summary, the mind, like the heart, contains both biological and psycho-spiritual faculties, each associated with its own system. The nervous system serves the physical body and the psycho-spiritual system serves the spiritual body, but these systems interact with each other and have an impact on each other. Therefore, our ability to take care of our "biological mind" will only promote the health of our "psycho-spiritual mind," and our ability to take care of our "psycho-spiritual mind" will only promote the health of our "biological mind." For example, today science has confirmed that utilizing the mind to engage in practices such as

gratitude or learning, only promotes the health of our biological mind and the nervous system it is a part of. So, while the mind or brain is not the leader of the psycho-spiritual system, its position is still a very crucial one, and one that serves the health of our entire being. For, if the mind is well utilized and taken care of, the mind only becomes a better servant of the heart, and as you learned, the heart's healthy condition facilitates the health of our whole being.

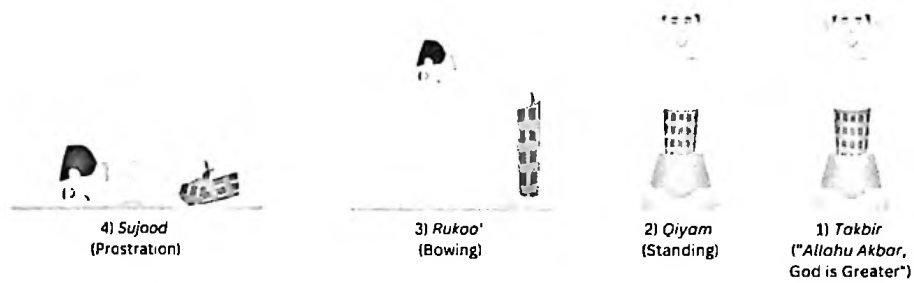
This marvelous analytical mind we are given is a powerful tool and a miraculous machine designed to help us interact with our world, collect information from our experiences, process that information, organize that information, interpret it, and then store it. It serves the functions of cognition, emotion, and has a role in impacting our behavior. But its greatest responsibility is to serve the heart, its leader. The information we collect with our minds, the thoughts we select, and how we direct the presence and attention of the mind, can either promote the growth of our *nafs* or the growth of our hearts and its alignment with the *ruh*. The H.O.M.E. Method is designed to help us utilize the mind in service of the heart's growth and nourishment, so the heart continues to lead effectively, and as a result, harmony is maintained in the psycho-spiritual system. When the mind is not directed appropriately, cared for properly, nourished efficiently, the heart can be left malnourished without the right food to fuel its growth and direction towards God and all that serves the spiritual body (*ruh*).

One of the greatest signs that solidified for me that the heart, and not the mind, is designed to be the lead, is *sujood,* the prostration position of prayer. Infact, it was *sujood* that was really the greatest and final sign that confirmed for me the truth and power of the Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method, and why this mind was designed to be a servant and not the master of the heart. This sign presented itself to me as I had started to do the work of leading from my heart in prayer and increasing my presence with God. At that time, I found my mind and thoughts to be quite distracting in prayer. I was always judging my experience, thinking about how well I did the prayer, if I made any mistake, and this all took away from me actually connecting with my Creator. One day, I was reflecting on the positions of prayer, and how my mind is the loudest at the beginning of prayer in the standing position, but then as I put my forehead to the ground, I experience the most peace and connection. It was in *sujood,* that I felt the greatest peace, alignment, and the power of my heart. And I knew from a *hadith* of the prophet (ﷺ), that *sujood* is the closest position a person is to their Creator.[97] I knew that it was the most sacred position of a believer. There is a power experienced in *sujood* that

97 *Sahīh Muslim,* 482.

cannot be experienced anywhere else. It is my favorite position in the whole world, my greatest haven in this *dunya*. It is where I feel the most alive, and where I hope to be when my body ceases to live. And it is through this most beloved of havens that God connected me to a great truth. And that is, to see that the heart is the rightful lead and master of the mind, all we have to do is look at *sujood*, the very position we are closest to God.

Each of the 5 prayers are structured according to *rak'ahs*, which are the single repetition of prescribed movements and supplications performed. Each prayer has its own number of *rak'ahs*. Each *rak'ah* consists of the following main prescribed movements: *takbir, qiyam, rukoo'*, and *sujood*.



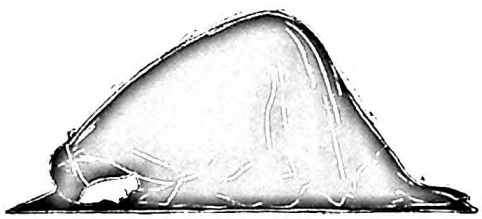
When you are standing up as you start the prayer, your mind is above your heart, but as you come to the most sacred position, *sujood*, the heart is higher than the mind. It is the mind (and its highest functioning features) that are lowered to the ground, not our heart. Right here, in this most healing of positions, in this most therapeutic of positions, in the most miraculous of positions, God is showing us the true alignment of our mind and heart. He is teaching us that the mind is powerful, but needs to be humbled consistently so we do not burden it more than it was designed to bear. God teaches us in every *sujood* that, when we humble our minds, the heart rises to its rightful place as leader of our being.

When we put our forehead on the floor in prostration to our Creator, we are essentially putting our most frontal area of our head to the ground. In psychology, this area is known as the prefrontal cortex, which is the most forefront area of the frontal lobe of the brain. The prefrontal cortex is responsible for higher cognitive functions, such as problem solving, planning, decision making, focusing our attention, and all the mental processes that allow us to plan for the future, set goals, adapt, and achieve milestones we aim for in life. The prefrontal cortex is constantly processing input and information it receives from several regions in the brain. It is the part of the brain that is responsible for impulse control and helping us regulate our emotions and reactions. It is the part of the brain that is constantly thinking ahead of possible scenarios

or consequences to certain situations, events, other people's actions, or even one's own actions. The prefrontal cortex is what allows us to anticipate changes or events in our environment, and to adjust ourselves accordingly to certain circumstances and behaviors. All these high executive functions are done by this most frontal part of the brain, the very part of our head we place on the ground in *sujood.* And while this part of the brain is what helps us humans achieve many great things in life, it is also the part of us we can utilize to engage in overthinking, excessive worrying, impulsivity, unhealthy reactions, and distractions that leave us disconnected from our hearts, our present, and God. It is the part of us that can create a lot of distress in our life if we do not put it in its right place.

Sujood – as I realized so poignantly one afternoon after I returned from my first *umrah* trip in 2013 – is the act of placing the mind in its rightful position, and that is *never* above the heart. It is the practice of humbling the mind, despite its magnificence. It is the place of reminding the head that it is not really the *head* of our being. *Sujood* is the ultimate reminder to the mind that its true position within our being is that of a servant, not a leader. As we place this most high executive functioning part of us to the ground, we are humbling ourselves, all our knowledge, all our planning, all our "what ifs," all our doubts, all the thoughts fueling our worries, all our distractions and placing them on the ground into the hands and power of our Creator. And in this great position of humility – in this most noble of positions, in this position when we are closest to our Creator – we will see that as the mind (particularly its highest functioning part) is physically on the ground, it is the heart that is physically positioned above it.

If you look at the body's
position in *sujood,*
you will see that the heart
is higher than the mind.
There is a message in that.
Humble your mind
And your heart will rise.[98]



I will never forget this moment in my life, when God unveiled me from this truth. It was the moment that solidified and confirmed my theories and work I had been doing with "Heart Over Mind & Ego," and I truly felt like I had discovered a great treasure. It was that moment that taught me to humble this mind of mine that I was putting so much pressure on to figure everything out. I was bullying my mind to give me solutions to my every problem, to

98 Poem by the author.

define who I am, and to walk towards God and experience connection with Him. I feel the most peace in *sujood* because that is the moment I am physically showing my mind that it is not the lead of me. It is not what I worship – God is. And it is not what God designed to be the lead of my inner world and psycho-spiritual system – the heart is.

3) The Ego (Lower Self/*Nafs*)

The third and last main entity of the psycho-spiritual system is the ego (or *nafs*). In the H.O.M.E. Method's Psycho-Spiritual Model, the ego is defined as the lower self or lower *nafs*. As you learned earlier, Islam teaches us that there are three main stages of the self (or in Arabic, the *nafs*), with the "self inciting to evil" (*an-nafs al-'ammārah bil su'*) as the lowest and least matured stage of the self. This is the part of us that is led by desires, comforts, self-importance, pleasure, and instant gratification. For the sake of simplification, this lower *nafs* is what I also refer to as "ego" in the H.O.M.E. Method, for the ego is a key element and aspect of the *nafs*. The *nafs* is the ego-led and desire-led self that does not see beyond its wants, comforts, instant gratification, and "me, myself, and I." This is the part of our *self* that we are designed to outgrow and mature beyond as we evolve on our spiritual path. In the H.O.M.E. Method's Psycho-Spiritual Model, the ego or *nafs* will be used interchangeably with the understanding that the *nafs* I am referring to within the psycho-spiritual system is the lowest stage of the *nafs*, or the lower self.

This lower self (*nafs*) has an animal-like nature to it, as it is driven by its desires and passions, and it must be distinguished from the heart, for its strength diminishes the heart's strength, and its weakness empowers the strength of the heart. As Ibn Al-Qayyim beautifully said: "*One thing is the life of the animal, passionate self (al-nafs al-bahîmîya al-shahwāniya) and its health and strength. Another different thing is the life of the heart (qalb), its health and strength. The one who cannot distinguish between these two things must cry for the life of his heart, because his heart is dead. He must cry for the light of his heart, because his heart is drowned in the seas of darkness.*"[99]

In the H.O.M.E Method's Psycho-Spiritual Model (Figure 1), I utilize a balloon to signify the *nafs* (or ego), for it is something that either inflates and continues to inflate when we give it the lead, or deflates when the heart is in the lead. For the heart to lead, we must become sharply attuned to when our *nafs* is being strengthened or rising within us to attempt to take the leadership that doesn't rightfully belong to it.

So what is the role of the ego (or *nafs*)? And why would God place something within us, if we are designed to overcome it, tame it, and go against it? These

99 Perho, I. (2015).

are questions that I had for years on my own spiritual path, and it was through both the study of psychology and the study of Islam that God guided me to the answer. Early on in my journey, I learned statements like, "*hate your nafs in order to grow*" or "*your nafs is your enemy*," and this really confused me, especially as I was trying to navigate a loving relationship with myself. I had the questions of, "*how can I hate something that God created within me?*" and "*how can I be my own enemy when I am trying to befriend myself?*" It was a challenging road, but gradually, through seeking knowledge, trial and error, and various tests and experiences, I arrived at the answer. I came to realize that I shouldn't hate any part of me, and that everything within me serves a purpose. This is what led me to start reflecting on the role of the ego in the span of the psychological development of the human being.

Psychology views the ego as the part of us that allows us to recognize that we are a separate identity. It is what allows us to recognize "I" and go through the natural process of differentiation or individuation. Individuation is the process of developing individuality. It is the process in which the individual understands that he or she is separate from the collective or universal world surrounding them. Early on in development, during the infant stage, we do not understand that we are a separate self. In fact, we see our caretakers as our whole world. As the infant grows older, the child begins to understand that they are a separate self. As a result, they begin to recognize "I" and begin expressing what they want. They begin using statements like, "*I don't want this*," "*I want this*," or say "*no*" very often to things that they do not like. This is a natural part of the process of individuation and the development of the ego. As the ego develops, the child naturally prioritizes the wants of "I," as the child's spiritual self is still not yet fully developed, so the "ego" becomes the central point.

The ego is the part of us that was created to help us ensure our human survival, security, and place in the world. It is what The H.O.M.E. Method views as the inner child within us, and therefore does not deserve our meanness but our compassion and guidance. In relation to the ego, which is like a child, the heart is designed to be its parent. A child needs its parent to guide it, but if a child is left to lead without the guidance of the parent, the child ends up in great harm. Ultimately, the H.O.M.E. Method and its Model views the ego as essential to our development for a given time, but not the part we are meant to live from or lead from as we mature and develop our higher spiritual self. After all, we can't be children forever.

> "*The first half of life is devoted to forming a healthy ego, the second half is going inward and letting go of it.*" — Carl Jung

If we leave the ego untamed or give it the position of leadership within our being, it will never be satisfied, and we will find ourselves endlessly chasing its whims and wants. This in turn destroys our spirit and causes great misalignment, for the heart is left without proper care and nourishment as we spend our energy chasing the wants of the ego. So we have to learn to navigate and master our ego throughout our human experience, so that it doesn't master us. And it is in the mastering of our ego that we actually experience great joy, peace, elevation. If we had nothing to overcome or master, there would be no victory, strength, or greater joy to attain. As Imam Al-Ghazali says, "*All of a man's happiness is in him being the master of his ego, while all his suffering is in his ego being his master.*" We were never meant to lead from this temporary human part of us, but rather from the permanent spiritual part of us that never dies. Only then can we experience great alignment, peace, and growth.

The Three Functions of the Psycho-Spiritual System

In the H.O.M.E Method's Psycho-Spiritual Model, the three functions of the psycho-spiritual system are 1) cognition, 2) emotion, and 3) behavior. Each of these functions are influenced by the three entities (the heart, mind, and ego), their interactions with one another, and the alignment of the psycho-spiritual system as a whole.

1) Cognition is a key function of the psycho-spiritual system. It is a contributing factor of intelligence and consists of all the intellectual and cognitive processes that help us understand, interpret, and make sense of the information we receive and interact with in the world. The H.O.M.E. Method's Psycho-Spiritual Model identifies cognition to be a function of the heart, mind, and ego, but within different levels. The ego is like the child and the heart and mind are like the parents. The ego, which is often compared to the child within us, has an ability to understand from its own lens, but its cognitive abilities are not as developed or superior as the mind and heart. It views the world through a very limited lens, and therefore cannot be depended on to understand the world in a way that is true and serves the soul. The ego has a simpler intelligence, and its view and understanding of its experiences is guided by the pursuit of comfort, desire, instant gratification, self-importance, security, and survival. Therefore, it needs the intelligence of the mind and heart (the parents) to see things outside of its limited knowledge and understanding. For example, a child may ask their parents to buy them something or take them somewhere, but does not understand that the very thing they are seeking is harmful to them. All they see is excitement, what feels good, and what is fun. The parent, though, has greater cognitive abilities to understand the harms

of the very thing the child is seeking and can guide the child away from it.

The mind (or brain) has greater, more developed, and superior cognitive abilities. The brain's view of its experiences is not guided by the same factors as the ego. It is guided by the pursuit to collect, process, rationalize, organize, arrive at logic, and understand. The mind is a complex cognitive and intellectual machine that is constantly processing information it receives from the world, organizing that information, interpreting it, and then storing it to help us make sense of what we witness, but also making that information available for us to use accordingly to inform choices and behaviors. Its cognitive abilities are centered around logic, rationale, order, and protocol. But just like the ego needs the greater cognitive abilities of the mind and heart, the mind needs the heart. The mind's cognitive abilities are magnificent, but not greater than the heart's. In fact, the mind needs the intelligence of the heart to make sense of the information it processes. The mind is limited. It can't understand beyond the information it has to process. Through our 5 senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell), the mind is able to receive input from the external world and all that is in it. Each of these senses are experienced by a specific organ that sends messages to the brain. It is the part of us that allows us to understand the complex world we are interacting with every day but also our inner world. For example, if we touch something hot, a pain signal is sent to our brain informing us that what we just touched is harmful.

But it is not just the mind (or brain) that has the cognitive ability to process sensory information on its own and sends its own messages to the brain. The heart has the power to also interact with sensory information on its own level. The heart itself has the power to *think*, as reflected in the following *hadith*, where the Prophet (ﷺ) said, "*Allah (God) said, 'I have prepared for My righteous slaves (such excellent things) as no eye has ever seen, nor an ear has ever heard nor a human heart can ever* ***think*** *of.*"[100]

Information is not only sent one way, from the brain to the heart. The heart also has the capacity to provide information *to* the brain, and impact the way the brain interprets that information. We see evidence of this in the relationship between the physical (or biological) heart and the physical (or biological) brain. The biological brain is not just sending information to the biological heart, but the biological heart is also sending information to the biological brain. For instance, when someone is experiencing great anxiety or distress, and they start taking deep breaths, their heart rate starts to slow down, and when it slows down, it sends the message to the biological brain that everything is okay. In turn, the brain's "fight or flight" response starts to

100 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, 7498.

reduce as it starts to register that, "*we are safe now.*" So we see this example of the heart guiding the brain on a physical level, and the same is also true on a psycho-spiritual level, but the key is that the brain must be subservient to the heart in order to accept its perception, guidance, and feedback. When we lead from our heart, and our heart prioritizes God, God unveils it from many truths. He allows it to process, perceive, and understand truths and meanings from the information the senses give it from the world, the experiences we face, and the actions we engage in. A heart that is the lead, that has God as its Highest Value and is nourished properly, can guide the mind to more easily change its perceptions, reform its interpretations, unlearn harmful core beliefs and values, and redirect its thoughts and opinions to serve the path of our higher self and our holistic growth. But the key here is the heart's condition is well taken care of. For a heart that is not cared for cannot lead in such a way. It can't see truth as truth.

The human brain possesses superior cognitive abilities, but it requires the support and guidance of the heart to navigate them appropriately and in service of our soul. The brain, being a rational and analytical tool, will process and understand according to its own abilities and limitations. The heart's cognitive abilities are the most superior of our being, for the heart can understand *without* order, while the brain seeks order. The heart can comprehend the unseen and not just the seen. It is the heart that allows the brain to see beyond what is seen. The heart can access meaning regardless of what is visible to it. It can see what the brain cannot. Its intellect and ability to decipher meaning from the information of the world is dependent on its connection to its Creator. The more connected the heart is to its Creator, the more its cognitive abilities are strengthened, its intelligence becomes sharpened, and it becomes more unveiled from greater meanings and truths in life.

2) Emotions are the second important function of the psycho-spiritual system. The H.O.M.E. Method does not view emotions as just a function of the mind, but that our varying emotions can be experienced by all three entities: the heart, mind, and ego. Emotions are also a contributing factor of intelligence, for through the experience of feeling, we are able to understand and connect to the information we receive and experiences we interact with. Unfortunately, though, in the West, we have a history of viewing emotions as a function that is of lesser use than logic, which we now know from the research on intelligence that there is a different but powerful kind of intelligence that we have neglected and that is *emotional* intelligence.

Emotions are a great tool of connection and have their own intelligence that should not be minimized, but they are not an entity on their own. They are experiences we have in our inner world (or psycho-spiritual system) that

are influenced by the mind, heart, and ego. The heart – depending on its condition, direction, thoughts, interpretations, and beliefs – has the capacity to feel varying emotions. The mind, depending on its thoughts, beliefs, and direction, also has the capacity to feel varying emotions. And of course, the *nafs* (or ego) is constantly influencing us to feel all kinds of emotions.

The heart can experience the most beautiful of emotional experiences and peace when it is connected to God, nourished properly, and given its rightful position of leadership over the other entities within us. For instance, in the Qur'an, God shows us the power for the heart: "*Those who believe and whose hearts find rest in the remembrance of Allah (God), Verily, in the remembrance of Allah (God) do hearts find rest*" (13:28).

In the Western psychological world, emotions are often viewed as solely a function of the mind, negating all other entities within us and their power to feel and experience different emotions. And oftentimes in the popular psychology world, I see many people associating emotions with the heart, and usually in a negative light – where the heart is is viewed as this weak and unstable facet within us simply because it feels – and the brain is viewed in a more positive light as the more stable, emotionless, and logical facet. The H.O.M.E. Method views emotions in a positive light whether they are associated with the brain or heart, meaning that they aren't negative or weaker aspects of ourselves. It is okay to have emotions. Logical thinking isn't the only way to interact with our world and understand it. It is just one aspect, and emotions are another. Emotions (both positive and negative) can be products of more than one entity, and a product of how we direct the different entities within us.

Above all, unlike many of the messages people receive today to blindly follow their emotions, the H.O.M.E. Method teaches that emotions are not meant to be the lead of our being, and they are not meant to be permanent destinations. What we feel should not be given the highest priority, just like our thoughts should not be given the highest priority. Emotions should not be given the same value as God, for this is a form of *shirk*, associating partners with God. Just like cognitive abilities, emotions are also great inner tools designed to help us understand ourselves and others, experience connection, navigate our way in this world, and ultimately connect us to God.

I view emotions as being one of the most beautiful inner gifts that God has given mankind. The ability to feel – both pain and joy, and the entire spectrum of emotions that exist within our human experience – is such a great blessing, and one we often ignore. We don't see that the ability to feel such opposite forms of emotions help us greatly understand ourselves and our path in this world. We often take them for granted and we do not see their beauty. And at times, we can even interact with emotions in a very narcissistic way. We only

welcome them when they make us feel good, and reject them, ignore them, and gaslight them when they make us feel not-so-good. We want nothing to do with our emotions when we feel anything other than good. It is a very ego-centered relationship. But this is what the world is programming us to do. It is programming us to chase "feeling good," to worship our egos, and to center our lives around what serves it, but not what serves our soul. As a result, we prevent ourselves from experiencing a fulfilling relationship with our emotions, a relationship in which we allow ourselves to genuinely connect with them, embrace them, accept them, direct them appropriately, and learn from them.

3) **Behaviors** are the third function of the three entities. The mind, ego, and heart, as well as their interactions with one another, can influence our behaviors. The mind and all its mental processes can influence our behaviors. The *nafs* (or ego) also can influence us to act in ways that go against our *ruh*, and causes us to transgress against our very nature. And worse, if we give the *nafs* the lead, the heart will be left without guidance. It will be left to face the direction of the *nafs*. And being like a mirror, the heart will begin to reflect the wants and desires of the *nafs*, and our behaviors will begin to reflect that as well.

The H.O.M.E. Method teaches that, by making the heart the lead, and prioritizing its care, our behaviors can then be transformed. The Qur'an beautifully highlights this relationship between the heart and good actions (or behaviors): "*Indeed, those who believe (or have faith), do good, establish prayer, and pay alms-tax will receive their reward from their Lord, and there will be no fear for them, nor will they grieve*" (2:77). In this verse, God is showing us the relationship between faith and good actions. Faith (*iman*) is an experience of the heart, not the mind or the ego. The mind can provide the heart information that supports its experience of faith, but faith (just like love) can only be experienced by the heart. And when the heart has an experience as powerful as faith, the behaviors become transformed and aligned with that experience.

The Flow of the Psycho-Spiritual System

Now that you know the entities and functions, it is important to know the flow. As when we study any system, it is not enough to know the entities of that system; we have to know the flow. Every system that exists in the world contains certain entities that have a specific role within that system. As each entity fulfills its God-given role, it contributes to the natural and healthy flow of that system. When each entity is aligned with the role it was created to fulfill, the system's health and stability is maintained and can fulfill its purpose. So whenever we seek to promote and maintain the healthy functioning, harmony, peace, and stability of any system, we must deeply understand that it is not enough to simply just know the entities of that system, but we must also know

their specific role so that the system flows in a way that ensures its optimal functioning and health.

Let's refer back to the solar system, and for the sake of this example, I will relate the heart to the sun. As mentioned earlier, the sun is the only entity in space that holds a gravitational pull strong enough to keep the planets orbiting around it. If anything else took the center position of the sun, it would not contain a pull strong enough to support the other entities in its system. The solar system would be destroyed. Nothing else in space is created and designed to fulfill the role of the sun. Nothing else can sustain the harmonious orbit of the planets around it. And we would witness the chaos that would exist as a result of the planets choosing a leader for their system that was not designed to fulfill that role.

Chaos is always the consequential experience within any system, space, organization, or even home, when the entities or people within them deviate from the roles they were created and designed to fulfill. And the same goes for our psycho-spiritual system. Just as the sun is the assigned leader and center of the solar system, the heart is the assigned leader and center of the psycho-spiritual system. If any other entity within its system (i.e., the mind or ego) took its center position, it would not be strong enough to sustain the orbit and harmony of the system. The heart is the only entity within its system that has a pull strong enough to keep the other entities in line. No other entity was created to handle the position of center and leader of the psycho-spiritual system.

The heart is designed to be the priority, the leader of the system, but if we choose to give that role to anything else, we will always experience chaos, instability, and above all, we will be an obstacle to this system fulfilling its purpose, which is to experience God and to navigate everything He puts on our path as a means to Him (the essence of *tawheed* and *ibadah*).

The rest of the entities in the psycho-spiritual system are designed to flow in the direction of the heart and in service of the heart, just as blood flows to the biological heart to be pumped to the rest of the body. Similarly, the psycho-spiritual heart has to be the central leader in which the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral information from the mind and *nafs* goes for higher processing. In the psycho-spiritual system, the heart has the ultimate authority over what the mind and *nafs* provide it. The heart, if a true leader, will then process what the mind and *nafs* give it through a God-centered lens, in an effort to align itself with our higher self (the *ruh*). When this happens, the heart experiences an elevated cognitive and emotional experience that then elevates the behaviors and actions that we select to engage in. We can see evidence of this truth in the blessed month of Ramadan. Infact, the month of Ramadan is what showed me how powerfully the heart becomes elevated when our psycho-spiritual system is aligned appropriately.

During Ramadan, God shows us the potential of our hearts when we deprive our bodies and *nafs* from their whims and desires. Like in any system, when one part of a system becomes weaker, another part of the system has no choice but to step up. For example, it is known that people who have impaired sight tend to have a level of hearing that is above the average person whose sight is intact. The opposite is also true: people who have impaired hearing tend to have stronger eyesight. In any system, the entities within that system attempt to compensate for the deficiencies of other entities. This is because the entities within a system are designed to keep the system functioning. They are programmed to maintain equilibrium. But the key is that the system has to be led by the right leader.

Ramadan is a time in which both the mind and the *nafs* make way for the heart to lead again and take back its rightful position of leader within our psycho-spiritual system. Ramadan is the 30-day training camp that God created to realign our inner world every year, recalibrate our inner compass and redirect it back towards Him. It teaches us to prioritize our higher self (our *ruh*) and not be led by our lower self (our *nafs*). In Ramadan, we fast, depriving the physical body of food from dawn (*fajr*) to sunset (*maghrib*). During this time, we are taught that not only food or fulfilling sexual desires can break our fast, but any action that does not serve our *ruh* and its beautiful return to God can also put our fasting at risk. As Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) said: "*Whoever does not give up false speech and acting in accordance with it, and ignorant conduct, Allah (God) has no need of him giving up his food and drink.*"[101] He (ﷺ) also said: "*Fasting does not just mean giving up food and drink, rather fasting also means giving up idle and obscene talk.*"[102]

The fasting of Ramadan is not solely a fasting of the physical body. It is a holistic fast that includes the fasting of our eyes, ears, tongues, minds, and egos. As the physical body fasts from food, the eyes fast from looking at anything that does not serve the heart. The ears fast from hearing anything that does not nourish the heart. The tongue fasts from saying anything that can impact one's own heart or the heart of others. The mind fasts from absorbing information from our world that doesn't serve its leader, the heart. Finally, the *nafs* (or ego) fasts from aimlessly following its desires, impulses, and from seeking immediate gratification.

With every "no" we say to the *nafs* – when it wants food, when it wants to follow a desire, when it wants to speak about things that are not beneficial, when it wants to feel superior to others by backbiting, when it wants to affirm its own self-importance, or when it wants immediate comfort and pleasure

101 Sahīh al-Bukhārī, 6057.

102 Sahīh Ibn Hibbān, 3561.

– we are putting it in its rightful place. In those moments when we say no to the *nafs*, we are saying, *You are not the lead of me, and I cannot be led by you.* With every no, it falls back, it becomes weaker, it loses a bit of its inflation, and becomes deprived of its fuel. At the same time, we are much more conscious of what we expose our senses to, allowing our brain to collect information that is beneficial and necessary for the heart's growth. In this month, we utilize the mind to serve our heart. The heart is no longer the servant, falling behind, subservient to our minds and egos. We realize that this heart is the strongest tool we have to connect to our Creator, and so we must utilize all our other facets and tools to strengthen this most noble part of our being. This is the part of us we so badly want to renew and transform during Ramadan.

During Ramadan, we become so deeply aware of how we play a role in the malnourishment and destruction of our own heart. God shows us the truth of ourselves. It is the best time to recognize how we play a role in our own struggles, and our own heart's malnourishment and its lack of liberation.

Ramadan is a time when we try to keep our egos in check and, as a result, our hearts become freer. And as we deprive our stomachs from being full, our hearts become fuller. And when the heart becomes nourished, everything else benefits from its nourishment, and that includes the rest of our being, as well as everything else outside of our being, such as our relationships, interactions, community, and the greater world we live in.

This is the psychological, social, and spiritual power of Ramadan. It facilitates a process for us to reorient ourselves and our inner world towards God – to recognize the power of our own hearts, to be connected to our greater spiritual potential, and as a result, so many other factors outside of us become positively impacted. As we prioritize God, our holistic well-being becomes empowered. In the end, we experience not only greater spiritual peace and alignment, but also greater psychological alignment during Ramadan.

As a psychologist, I recognized that Ramadan facilitates many positive therapeutic outcomes, and one of the greatest outcomes is that it helps us connect to our true selves. When providing therapy, one of my goals or focuses is to facilitate a process that helps a client shed their false beliefs and arrive at their true self, without all the influences and illusions that have covered their *fitrah* (or truthful state) with layer upon layer.

Ramadan allows for a similar process to take place, because without such a huge influence like *Shaytan (Satan)*, we can recognize our truths on a different level. In Ramadan, God takes away the greatest of harmful influences we face in this world, and that is *Shaytan*. As Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us,

"*When Ramadan begins, the gates of Paradise are opened and the gates of Hell are closed, and the devils are put in chains.*"[103]

Throughout the year, *Shaytan* works hard to attach us to great illusions, doubts, fears, and falsehoods that do not serve the path of our higher self and our inner alignment with our Creator. And many of us are greatly influenced by his relentless work to drive us off the straight path (*siratul mustaqeem*). We become burdened mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. *Shaytan* wants us living in our minds, not seeing beyond his *waswasa*, and being imprisoned by our distorted cognitive thoughts and beliefs about who God is, who we are, and what our future holds. He wants us spending all of our energy being led by our *nafs* or emotions, chasing the next dopamine rush from all the distractions that surround us. And then Ramadan comes along, and *Shaytan*'s influence is not as powerful. As the month progresses and we do the sacred inner work, we start to experience greater inner peace. It becomes easier to say no to our *nafs*. It becomes easier to direct our mind to serve our hearts.

And believe it or not, I have heard many people who struggle with OCD and intrusive thoughts tell me that their intrusive thoughts are lesser during Ramadan. This may not be the experience of everyone who struggles with OCD or intrusive thoughts, because the severity of OCD is different for every person, but what is true for many is that Ramadan brings with it a relief, a softness and an ease that is not experienced during any other month. It brings with it peace and great mercy. Throughout this month, God provides our hearts with a sharpened clarity, and shows us the truths of our self and the role we play in our relationship with Him, our distance from Him, and the spiritual, emotional, and personal challenges we go through in life. In fact, we shouldn't be surprised if difficult emotions or agitations surface while we are fasting, especially in the first few days. Fasting has a way of allowing our truths to surface, for it pushes us to face what we tried to avoid in the months before, outside of Ramadan. Without food and other outlets often used to mask our agitations and discomforts, we have no choice but to sit with the truth of what we are experiencing and take them all to God. That is the psychological, healing, and aligning power of Ramadan. It facilitates a process in which the heart becomes unveiled from great truths our *nafs* has been working hard to avoid so its comfort is not threatened.

With *Shaytan* chained, we are only left to our own influence. It is likely we are also left with the residual impact of *Shaytan*'s work on us throughout the year, but we can no longer blame him for our actions *during* Ramadan. Ramadan is the perfect time to evaluate ourselves without the influences of *Shaytan*. When we do that, we recognize many psychological barriers and layers

103 Sahīh al-Bukhārī, 3277; Sahīh Muslim, 1079.

we have placed between ourselves and our Creator. We realize that *Shaytan* plays a role, but so do we. God allows us to see just how powerful our role is in Ramadan. And there is no better time than Ramadan to empower that role, put down our excuses, and strive towards change. For God makes it so much easier for us in this month to do so, than any other time of the year.

Ramadan is designed to help us stop oppressing ourselves and our own hearts. As we begin to focus our energy on this once-neglected part of us (our spiritual body), we begin to feel a withering spark within it, waiting to be ignited. And since we cannot turn to food, or our desires to meet our needs of instant gratification, we have no choice but to start fueling that spark within our souls. As we reunite with His Book, His House, and His Remembrance, that spark will slowly turn into a fire and great light once again providing our hearts and subsequently our entire being with the light we need to thrive and meet the potential we were created for. We begin to realize a greater truth we have been disconnected from throughout the year, and that is that God suffices us in ways nothing else can. He is enough for all our hearts. And Ramadan is the month where our hearts remember the sweetness of that truth. Ramadan allows us to see what our higher self truly needed all along, and that is God and all that He designed as nourishment for it in this world. Think about this for a second: have you ever had moments where you thought you were hungry only to realize you were just thirsty? A moment where you were craving food but instead you drank water, and you realized you feel so sufficed that you no longer need food in that moment? Sometimes we think we are hungry when we really are just thirsty. We think we are craving food when all we really need is water, something to quench our thirst.

This is what we experience in Ramadan. For so long we hungered and craved things we thought would make us happy, from food to people, distractions, shopping, and external things we were attached to, but then Ramadan arrives and we realize that we weren't really hungry for those things but thirsty for the nourishment of the soul. We were craving the world, when all we really needed was to be quenched by God and the world He created for our soul to return to.

Food is the most basic desire of the human being, and physical hunger and thirst are the most foundational struggles of the human being. It comes before sexual desire and any other desire, for we cannot live without food. In fact, the advice Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) gave to those who are single and unable to get married, was to fast.[104] There is a great sign in this. If one can control the most basic and powerful desire of food, one can better control lesser desires, such as sexual desires. And through Ramadan, God shows us the power we have to overcome and transcend this most basic desire and struggle by nourishing

104 Sahīh al-Bukhārī, 5066.

and elevating the higher part of us, our soul. He shows us that if we can fast from food and water, we can fast from anything, anyone, and any attachment that does not serve us. And if we can cope with the pains of physical hunger and thirst by feeding the hunger and thirst of your soul, we can cope with anything that comes our way. This is the power of Ramadan. It shows us the potential God created within us all along!

Millions of Muslims around the world attest to this sufficing and aligning experience they feel during Ramadan. We get to experience the peace, harmony, and beauty that comes only when God becomes a priority and each of the entities within our inner world are functioning in a way they were created to. This is what leads many Muslims to say, "*I don't want Ramadan to end*," and cry as it leaves us, as if we are bidding farewell to a close loved one. Ramadan is so very dear to the hearts of Muslims, for it is the month that comes and shows us what our hearts were always created to do. The heart was created to seek God, worship Him, make Him the Highest Value, and connect to Him for its greatest nourishment. And even though many Muslims start the month with the *nafs* in the lead, as each day passes in this blessed month, we feel the heart rise, become stronger, become more connected, and receive the nourishment it needs to fuel who we are – and that is our spiritual being. We don't want Ramadan to leave, because it is the month that reminds us so powerfully of the higher self we should live from, our *ruh*. Every year, it reminds us so powerfully that *we are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience.*

And the reason we experience this truth so powerfully is because the heart takes its rightful place as leader of our inner psycho-spiritual system and every entity within this system becomes aligned in a way that fits our nature. The heart was always designed to lead so that the *ruh* can thrive and we can live from this higher, most elevated part of us. But when we give this position of leader to any entity other than the heart, we end up living from our lower self. As a result we experience a great level of inner conflict and distress and we are robbed of experiencing the great beauty, peace, and alignment that comes from living from our higher self. This is how God designed our inner world and psycho-spiritual system, and Ramadan is an opportunity to experience the harmony and bliss that comes when our system is aligned with the way God created it.

The H.O.M.E. Method & Practice: Building *Psycho-Spiritual Muscles*

To experience true transformation, and to prioritize the alignment of our psycho-spiritual system, we have to prioritize practice and application over just knowing. And this is why I believe it is crucial that we learn to cultivate and build what I call *psycho-spiritual muscles*. The H.O.M.E. Method emphasizes the importance of doing the work to cultivate and strengthen psycho-spiritual muscles that can help us experience greater inner peace, spiritual nourishment, mental and emotional alignment, and a healthier, fulfilling relationship with God and with ourselves. This is to emphasize practice and proactively interacting with the knowledge we gain, to see the fruits of it in our actions and day-to-day life. For this is what is most important. I utilize the word "muscle," because – just like our physical body's strength requires that we strengthen physical muscles – our psychological and spiritual strength requires the same. We don't just automatically wake up with fit bodies; we have to work them, do certain exercises, and stay consistent. And this is why people often hire personal trainers, so they learn the right exercises but also so that they have the right support and guidance as they work to perfect and transform their bodies. And while the health of our bodies is very important, the health of our mind, heart, and soul (our psychological and spiritual health) is even more important.

So far, in part 1 of this book, you have learned the foundational knowledge that is required to understand and experience the aligning power of The Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method. Now it is time to connect to the practices that will allow you to put that knowledge into motion, so that you can see the fruits of it in your lives. It's time to build important psycho-spiritual muscles necessary to your holistic alignment, peace, and success in this world and the next. In essence, it is time to *live by H.O.M.E.*

PART 2

PRACTICE

Please Note: The following practices serve as a guide and support to your spiritual, mental, and emotional empowerment and well-being, but do not serve as a replacement for seeking out psychological treatment and therapy for mental health challenges and disorders you may be struggling with.

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Living By H.O.M.E.
Cultivating The Right Approach to True Transformation

When we embark on a journey to renew ourselves, grow, improve, and transform our mind, heart, and being, we must first understand the journey of transformation itself, and cultivate the right approach towards the journey. I have found through my work that, many times, ***not*** understanding the journey of change itself can become one of the greatest barriers to actually experiencing the transformative fruits of our inner work. We have to first and foremost understand the nature of the journey we are navigating, or we risk not maximizing the path we are on, misinterpreting our obstacles and experiences along our path in a way that doesn't serve our growth, or we may find ourselves giving up before we see the fruits of our efforts.

It is a beautiful phenomenon to witness any positive transformation in our world. Transformation and positive change is when something or someone becomes beautified and that beautification creates great benefit. This is why I was always drawn to the work of transformation, both outward and inward. I love the work of beautifying the homes we live in (which is a great passion and hobby of mine since I was young), but more importantly, I love the work of beautifying the most important of homes, and that is the home *within*. Through my work of facilitating the healing, growth, renewal, and inner alignment of others, I am blessed with the opportunity to witness the beautification of people, their lives, and the subsequent beautification of the world. Ultimately, it allows me to witness God in action, for He is the Source of all beauty.

We all love to witness a great transformation. We love to see a caterpillar become a butterfly. We love to see a home become beautifully renovated. We love to see a person transform to being their healthiest and fit self. We are filled with hope at the site of dried up land being revived by the rain. We love to see a person overcome their hardest struggles. We love to see a person go from sadness to joy. We love to see a person go from being ill to healed. We are inspired by people going from dark periods in their life to times of light and peace. We are drawn to the beautification of people, things, and environments. We love beauty for we were created by the One Who is the Most Beautiful.

As Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us: "*Allah is Beautiful, (and) He loves beauty.*"[105]

There is a reason
we long to watch a sunrise.
We like to be present
when God relieves the world
of its darkness.[106]

Transformation is a sign of God's great presence in our life, for He is the Source of all healing, growth, transformation, light, and beauty we are seeking. Today, though, many people are attached more to the idea of transforming than the *actual* process of transformation. Many people love the *idea* of changing themselves, getting stronger, becoming freer internally, and becoming their best selves, but very few people love the journey itself. My work with many students and clients over the years has been about helping them see beauty in the journey itself, for it is the *journey* that transforms us, not the destination. We can't just long to see the sunrise and not appreciate the darkness of the night. We can't truly see beauty in the Spring if we refuse to embrace the long and morbid winter.

Too often, many people only find beauty in the abundance, the provisions, the renewal, and the visible and *final* result of transformation, while dismissing the value of the process that led to such results. And while the resulting beauty of transformation is captivating, we must not forget that there was much beauty to be found before the rain, before the flowers, before the revival, and within the journey itself, not just the end result we are witnessing. The earth is beautiful when it is fully quenched and every inch of it is covered in green, but isn't it also beautiful when a single lively green plant sprouts from a dry and cracked earth? Life emerging from a lifeless ground. A tree is beautiful covered in leaves and flowers, but isn't it also beautiful when an empty, barren tree still stands tall and strong – its identity not shaken by the loss of its leaves? A butterfly is a beautiful sight, but isn't its journey as a caterpillar transforming in its cocoon truly what makes the butterfly a creature we find so magnificent? There is so much beauty to be found in what is stuck before it flies, in what is broken before it is healed, in the emptiness before it is filled, in the darkness before the light, and in the drought before the rain. Beauty and blessings are not confined to only when we are given, but also when we are deprived. Beauty is present in the most difficult of paths, not just in the most beautiful of destinations.

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105 *Riyad as-Salihin,* 611 (*Sahih Muslim*).

106 Poem by the author.

I learned this truth so deeply from my long walks and hikes over the years.

Hiking or taking long walks is a spiritual, mental, and an emotional experience for me, not just a physical one. There was always something to learn about God and myself through the different paths I have walked. I think the reason I love being out in nature so much is because it not only declutters my mind and heart, allowing me to connect more deeply to God, but it also helps me discover pieces of myself I never knew. It might sound weird, but there are truths about God and myself that I learned on trails, in forests, and by oceans, that I don't think I could've been as attuned to those truths anywhere else. Hiking, in particular, has helped me understand the path of transformation so beautifully. I learned that I need to *walk* the entire path and all it contains for me to witness the most beautiful of views. I learned that if I stood at the beginning of the path wanting to know the entire path *before* I walked it, I would never get to experience the benefit of actually walking the path itself.

I never mind
getting lost
because I know
it means
there is something
to be found.[107]

You Cannot Transform Without God

Nothing meaningful can be found without God, and nothing can be beautifully transformed without God. As Ibn Ata'Allah Al-Iskandari (ﷺ) has said, *"What has he found who has lost You (God)? And what has he lost who has found You (God)? Whoever is content with a substitute for You (God) is at a loss, and whoever strays away from You (God) is certainly lost."*[108]

God did not create us to be our own lords, our own *rabb* or *ilah*. He did not create us to depend on ourselves, to be left to ourselves, to grow by ourselves, to go through hardship by ourselves, or to heal and transform by ourselves. And we have to deeply understand that our disconnect from God is what impedes our ability to truly grow and transform, for God tells us in the Qur'an, *"And do not be like those who forgot God, and He made them forget themselves..."* (59:19). This verse connects us to a great truth, and that is: a forgetfulness of God results in a forgetfulness of self. To forget God is to neglect your submission to Him and the way of life He has prescribed for you, and

107 Poem by the author.

108 Ibn Ata'Allah Al-Iskandari (2016)

that neglect translates to a direct neglect of *yourself.* Self-neglect is the direct consequence of our forgetfulness of God, His truths, and what He has called us to, for we end up forgetting or becoming disconnected from what is good for us, what is nourishing, what is necessary for our success in this world and the next. Without a remembrance of God and a connection to Him, we will end up chasing "growth" only to find that we are serving our lower self. And we will fail to show up for ourselves and what we need holistically to thrive, on a spiritual, mental, emotional, and even physical level. But the more we connect with God and remember Him, the more we become connected to our true selves and all that we truly need to thrive. This is why you will find that when you are truly doing the work of becoming closer to God, your holistic self-care exponentially improves as well and you become more attentive to what is truly important in every other area in your life as well. And when you are neglecting your relationship with God (i.e, your prayers, your zikr, etc.), you will find that what is truly important in all other areas of your life also becomes neglected, and your holistic self-care starts to fall short as well.

So, you see, we need God to grow on any level. It is not in our design or our programming to grow by ourselves, just like a baby or child isn't programmed or designed to be left to themselves or to grow by themselves. They need to grow within the care of their parents, with their parents watching and guiding their growth. If a child refused their parents' care or was neglected by their parents, their growth becomes negatively impacted. Their ability to grow beautifully, strong, and resilient becomes impeded. And the same happens when we attempt to grow and transform without God.

Be Okay With *Not* Knowing What the Path Will Be Like

As human beings, we are not good at handling uncertainty, and this can impact the way we approach our path to transformation. We are anxious to get to the end where we feel good while trying to avoid walking the path of *not* feeling good, not realizing that not feeling good is a natural ingredient of any path that leads to true transformation. This is a big mistake we make when we embark on a journey of positive change, alignment, and transformation. We want to see the whole path before we begin walking. The first thing we often do when we recognize we need to make a change in our life is we ask, "*How?*" *How will I change or achieve that goal? How will I become who God wants me to be? How will I get from point A to Z? And how will my life turn out and look like if I do actually make that change?* We begin to ask "*How?*" because all we see is the place we are standing. We can't begin to understand *how* what we hope to achieve will happen. We can't begin to fathom or imagine what our

life or path will look like if we take a certain step towards God, if we gave up that habit, if we left certain people or relationships, if we began practicing our faith a little bit better, if we sacrificed things we want for the sake of pleasing God, if we improve our self-worth, or if we change this or that. We can't wrap our mind around what our healing, our resilience, our coping, our growth, our *tazkiyah*, and our spiritual empowerment will look like. And if we are leading from our mind or *nafs*, we won't even move one step forward until we are certain of what the path holds for us. We won't walk unless we have all the information, which will never come to us if we stand still.

The path of transformation is designed to be walked, not just viewed from afar. If God showed us the whole path from where we are standing, there would be nothing to gain. And this is how we learn to understand our dependence on God, our need for Him, and the importance of trusting His promises and what He holds for us. It is in these moments that we recognize that our transformation and growth depends on what He decides to unveil and reveal to us. And so, it is through our inability to answer our own question of "*How?*" that we learn to accept *"what"* He has actually revealed to us in the present. We accept that all we see is where He allowed us to stand. And it is through that acceptance – that recognition of *Who* is in control, and the trust and *tawakul* that follows – that we begin to walk using the knowledge He gave us, while seeking and depending on His infinite knowledge and wisdom every step of the way.

We walk making Him the Destination and not our own selves and our own limited knowledge. And as we walk towards Him, He will reveal to our hearts a far greater truth and that is this: we do not need to figure everything out. We do not need to know the "hows" before we even move our feet. We do not need to know how exactly our change will look like or come about. All we need to do is direct our mind and heart to God and *begin* walking, proving our hearts are truly sincere about making the change our tongues have claimed. Only then, when we actually show up, does God allow the path to show up as well. He reveals the path to those who reveal they are genuine about making a change.

"*As you start to walk on the way, the way appears.*" — Rumi

Surrender to God's Timing of *When* You Should Know Something

Many times, when people start seeking knowledge, and begin their inner work or healing, they often start to feel regret and wish they had received the help or knowledge they are gaining at an earlier time. To that, I tell them that God, the All Knowing, knows what to give us and *when* to give it to us. When

we find ourselves thinking, "*I wish I knew this about myself earlier*," or "*I wish I started healing earlier*," or "*I wish I knew then what I know now*," we have to remember that God controls the timing of when truth and knowledge is revealed to us. It is God who unveils for us what we need to know *when* we need to know it. He knows us better than we know ourselves. It is possible that if He had unveiled for us *then* what we know now, our heart would not have been able to carry it, receive it, or be positively transformed by it. And perhaps, we are now exactly where we need to be to receive what He is teaching us today.

Choose the Right Pain

On the path to healing, growth, and transformation, we often forget that we are always choosing some form of pain. In fact, each day, as we strive to grow on any level, we will always be faced with a choice of which pain we want. There is an agitation and discomfort that comes when we begin to rise above our *nafs* (or ego) and elevate to our higher self, but our *nafs* won't like it. Our *nafs* will do anything to get us to avoid the pain of healing, the pain of unlearning false beliefs and what no longer serves us, and the pain of engaging in habits that don't immediately give us instant gratification. When the *nafs* is the lead, we will lie to ourselves and make a million excuses to avoid any pain or discomfort on our path. And the bigger lie we are believing in those moments is that we are simply choosing comfort over our pain, when in fact we are doing something worse. We are choosing a much *greater* pain.

When we do *not* choose the pain or discomfort of growth, we end up choosing something that is far more painful, and that is the suffering that comes from *not* growing. There is a common saying that "*pain is inevitable and suffering is optional*." I think this saying most definitely applies to the journey of transformation and growth. Pain is inevitable on our path to growth, but when we do not choose the pain of *now* that naturally comes from developing habits that are new, unlearning negative habits that are old, healing our wounds, and serving our higher self, we end up choosing the suffering of tomorrow.

There is no greater pain than the pain of staying stuck where we are – in the same cycles of destructive habits, in the prison of our unhealthy thoughts, fears, beliefs, and emotions, and in the firm and toxic hold of our lower self (*nafs*). This kind of pain feels like suffering, because it leads us to feel even more helplessness, powerlessness, and greater shame, which makes it even heavier for us to take the first step. The more we delay the pain of transformation, healing, and growth and the more we delay walking towards God or renewing our relationship with Him, the more that all that we are trying to remove and change in our life grows. This means that just because we are not choosing to change and grow, does not mean that our problems are not growing. What we

avoid only intensifies and becomes harder to change. Wounds left uncared for cause more severe and prolonged pain, as they start to affect all that surrounds them and can even infect our entire being. Unhealthy attachments left unbroken only turn into chains that are harder to break later on. A heart left unpurified only incurs greater barriers upon it that become harder to shed and release. The longer we wait to say "no" to our *nafs*, the harder it will be to say yes to what our hearts need. As a result, we become cut off from the light we need to feel awakened, alive, and connected to what matters in our life. Delaying our growth and the healing of our unresolved emotional wounds and insecurities only fuels our ego, and causes it to be a more powerful force in our being, which then blocks our heart from receiving the nourishment it needs to thrive.

Remember this: pain will get your attention either way. What you avoid today will come screaming at you in the future. What you neglect will show up in a different form. We see this particularly when people do not take care of their mental and emotional health. Their mental distress and emotional pain starts to set deep roots in their habits and behaviors, and can also manifest itself in a physical form that a person can no longer ignore. And when they do finally face their greater pain, it will take far more energy, resources, and time to now address the greater pain or consequence of avoiding the initial pain of growth and healing. But just as the avoidance of pain leads to greater pain, the choice to face the pain of *now*, the pain of growth, is followed by something greater as well, but it isn't pain or suffering.

When we choose the pain of now, we are choosing a pain that is followed by the most beautiful rewards. It won't lead to greater pain, but rather greater strength and freedom. There is no greater reward than healing, than growth, than cultivating positive inner beliefs and values that produce the most beautiful of actions and behaviors. There is no greater reward than feeling oneself break free of being stuck in the same place that is void of growth and peace. But this takes courage. It takes courage to face the pain and start *now*. And it also takes gratitude. Many times, I hear clients and students tell me, "*I wish I started this work sooner.*" There is a lot of regret that comes from delaying change, because one is hit with the great consequence of avoiding discomfort and pain. But we are human, and there is a time for everything. Do not lose hope. Replace "*I wish I had started this work sooner,*" with "*alhamdulilah (all praise is due to God) God allowed me to start this work now!*" Turn your regret into gratefulness. You can either regret all the time you let *Shaytan* and your *nafs* keep you from doing the work that matters, or you can show gratitude to God for giving you this new day and opportunity to begin your journey towards Him and to becoming who He wants you to be. For as long as God has given you a breath, it is never too late to start. Tell yourself, "*I won't waste*

any more time regretting not starting – today will be the day I start my journey to transform myself and my life." Remember, if it is hard to start today, it will be even harder to start tomorrow.

And never forget that you are always choosing some kind of pain, and the choice you have is in *which* kind of pain you want: the pain that is followed by transformation, healing and positive change or the pain that is followed by continued pain, or worse: suffering. Choose the pain of now, the pain of healing, the pain of growth, and not the pain of *later*, the far greater pain of staying the same.

When the pain of growth
becomes too much,
remember that the pain
of never growing is far greater.[109]

Lead From the Heart: Walk Towards God in all Your Conditions

In order to experience true transformation, we have to learn to walk towards God and all that serves us holistically – in all our imperfect conditions – whether we understand or know everything or not, whether we have certainty of the outcome or not, whether we feel good and motivated or not, whether we progressed towards our goal or regressed and faced setbacks, whether we feel the spiritual high or not. But this requires that we lead from the heart.

The heart, when it is the lead, understands that we are always a work in progress, and we will never arrive at this perfect destination of who we are, for we will never be perfect. It understands that there is beauty to be found within us, within our circumstances, and within our journey even if we have not yet achieved a milestone we are working towards. The heart is attached to intention and sincere effort, not the perfect outcome.

The ego (or *nafs*), on the other hand, does not live by these truths, and therefore we will never be at peace if we are led by it. If it is our leader, it will never guide us to true change, and will only contribute to far greater obstacles, shame, and a lack of truth on our path. The minute you are uncomfortable (as expected on the path of growth), it will try to distract you with something that can give you instant gratification. It tells you, "*look, you haven't been seeing any results through this work – leave it.*" *Shaytan* of course plays a key role in strengthening the voice of our *nafs*. He whispers, "*you already worked so hard and are in so much discomfort, you deserve a break,*" and that very break then beomes an abandonment of what serves you best. Whether you then abandon

109 Poem by the author.

your prayer, your work, your positive habits, or any of God's prescriptions for you that contribute to your growth and alignment, you end up giving up on the path that truly leads to greater peace and joy.

Hiking has also taught me this truth very deeply, particularly how to walk towards God in all our conditions. Like our path to God, the trails we walk in a forest are always changing, but we know each trail leads to a final destination, and we do not forget that just because it gets easier at times or more difficult at times. The same trail can have both rocky and flat parts, uphill and downhill parts, and all parts of the trail have something to offer me and neither one keeps me from continuing to walk towards my destination. When I encounter parts that are more enjoyable with beautiful views, I may stop for a little to take it all in, but I don't let the beauty distract me from the destination. I don't let the beauty keep me there till the sun goes down. I don't wait till darkness envelops me and I am no longer able to clearly see the path. I continue walking towards my destination as soon as I see the light start to disappear and darkness starts to fill the sky. If the road bends, I understand that the road bends to help me, to keep me from walking off a cliff and harming myself, and that eventually, all bended roads eventually straighten again. When the path becomes hard and I feel more tired, I may pause to rest, drink some water, but I don't let the temporary exhaustion discourage me from continuing to walk. I don't let the temporary difficulty make me lose hope in what the rest of the path holds. I recognize that this rocky path or steep hill is contributing to my physical fitness. It is making me stronger. This part of the path is strengthening my endurance. And when the difficult part is over, when I am finally on top of that hill, when the beautiful view is in sight, and when I make it to the easy parts of the trail, I feel a roaring power and growth within me that couldn't have been developed during the easy parts of the trail. This taught me so deeply that the "hills" or "steep climbs" on our path in this world may be difficult, but they aim to elevate us to higher grounds. Without them, we could remain walking the path with ease, but we risk never ascending to experience anything higher than the station we are at.

All the trails I have walked taught me about this ever-changing and temporary reality that is the *dunya* (this world). They taught me the importance of not losing hope in God and how He is molding me when the path gets difficult or starts to shift, and the importance of not viewing the temporary path and its difficulties as my permanent reality. The key is to keep the eye of our heart on the greater reality and destination that awaits us, to make sure that this *dunya* (this world) does not make us forget our *akhira* (the hereafter), that our temporary pain does not make us forget the rewards God holds for is in this world but also the next, and that the pain of *now* does not make us forget the growth, peace healing, strength, and elevation of tomorrow. The ultimate

priority is to keep walking towards the Most Perfect – and all that serves our path to Him (spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and physically) – in all our conditions, regardless of our imperfections and the changing nature of our path.

My dear
the road bends
not to create
hardship for you
but often to
protect you
from falling.[110]

So, as you embark on this sacred journey of inner transformation, train yourself to *expect* shifts, tests, hardship, uncertainty, and setbacks, for this is a natural part of our journey, but also know that any difficulty you face along the way never lasts forever.

Key Practice Tip: Time to Abandon Perfectionism

In your notebook or journal, write down, using pen and paper, all that you will train yourself to *expect* on your journey of transformation and on your path to accomplishing any goal you set out for yourself, such as: *"I will expect highs, mediums, and lows (when it comes to how I feel along the way)." "I will expect both progress and setbacks." "I will expect both difficulty and ease." "All parts of the path aim to serve me, and I will walk towards God through all of them."*

Learn to keep walking, even if it's heavy, even if you fall at times, and even if you are going to drag your feet. Keep showing up to what God called you to, to your commitment to grow and change, even if there are gaps between your progress and efforts, or if you abandoned your intentions for a while. Keep turning back to the sacred path of growth, alignment, beautification, and purification, which is essentially the practice of *tawba*. *Tawba,* which is often translated as repentance, is so much more than that. It is the practice of turning back to God, His prescriptions, to belief in Him and His truths, to our *fitrah*, and all that serves our path to Him. And our journey in this world will always *be* about *turning back*, redirecting ourselves after getting off the sacred track, adjusting the lens of our heart after it loses focus, and returning

110 Poem by the author.

to all that is true and wholesome after we have been walking in illusion. You see, God never asked us to be perfect, but He always asked us to turn back as many times as we need to, and regardless of how many times we have fallen. He does not expect perfection from us one bit, so much so, that Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) has taught us, *"By Him in Whose Hand is my life, if you were not to commit sin, Allah would sweep you out of existence and He would replace (you by) those people who would commit sin and seek forgiveness from Allah, and He would have pardoned them."*[111] This hadith of course is not encouraging us to sin or we should not be deceived to think that it is okay to intentionally sin, but it is to teach us that if perfection was never an expectation of God for us on our path, why should we place that expectation on ourselves? God knows that setbacks, mistakes, failures, and obstacles are all part of this imperfect human experience He is carrying us through, and we should view them as a natural part of our human experience as well. God knows the struggle it takes to keep getting back up after every fall, to mend our heart after every break, and to truly transform ourselves holistically, and our connection to this truth is what will help us keep going. We have to truly know and believe in our heart that He is *with* us every step of the way. So, whatever you do, don't halt, don't stop, don't turn away, don't sabotage your efforts, and don't depend solely on yourself and your *nafs*. Remember, you were never meant to transform on your own or carry your burdens alone. He is always there and ready to help you carry your struggles and help you see what you need to see.

Keep walking my dear
Be patient with the unknown
With all the turns on your road
And with the path that isn't shown
Keep walking my dear
Be at peace, God never left you alone
He will soon reveal the path
And what He holds for you will be shown.[112]

111 Sahih Muslim 2749

112 Poem by the author.

Pause to Make *Dua*

Ya *Allah* (Oh Lord), help me walk towards you in all my imperfect conditions, regardless of how I feel or don't feel, what I understand or don't understand, what I see or don't see, and protect me from *Shaytan*'s attempts as well as my own *nafs*'s attempts to make me hopeless of your closeness, mercy, and reward. You are the Most Perfect, Most High.

Be Patient with Yourself As You Grow & Transform

The reason many people do not experience true growth and remain spiritually, mentally, and emotionally stagnant for many years is that they are impatient with the journey itself, and they give up on themselves when they do not see the fruits of their efforts. They give up when they do not see immediate results. And they think that "no *visible* results" means they are not growing or transforming, while their growth may actually be in motion, just not yet visible to them. An example of this is when someone is on a fitness journey and they are trying to get to a healthy weight. If they are showing up, eating clean, working out, but they don't see visible results on the scale, does this mean their growth and progress is not in motion? Of course not. And what if a person quits after a week or two because they didn't see results? Would that make sense? No, it wouldn't. They would be sabotaging their efforts and hard work just because their results are not yet visible. But the truth is, transformational results on any level (spiritual, psychological, or physical) take time to be visible. But for us to witness them, we need patience.

After I developed the H.O.M.E. Method and was actively working to apply it in my own life, and to do the work of leading from my heart and prioritizing it over my *nafs*, I realized how challenging it was at times, and this led me to ask my mentor Ustadh Hassan Elwan at the time, about how to approach those difficult times, when we are not seeing the results of the transformative work we are doing. He said something profound that always stuck with me. He said, "*Be patient with your heart, as you were patient with your nafs.*" This taught me that we often do not realize how many months and years we allowed the *nafs* to lead us, and how patient we were with our *nafs* throughout those times. But when we start doing the work of leading from the heart, we can become impatient and want to see transformation right away. But it takes time. And

as we were patient with the growth of our *nafs*, as we gave in to its wants and needs, we have to *also* be patient with our heart, its growth, and its alignment with the right core beliefs and values.

Remember that **heart work is *hard* work**. The inner peace you want to gain is not cheap, for nothing worth having comes easy. It may not always feel great on the inside and look pretty on the outside. It often requires that we experience much discomfort and it won't always bring us instant gratification or provide us the answers we need right away. It also does not guarantee that our work and progress will be well-received by others, even those we love. And while this journey has many rewards, it requires us to make difficult choices, and they all require patience. Prioritizing the nourishment of our heart and doing this work of inner transformation means we learn to be patient with the discomfort of our *nafs* (or ego) when we do something that is good for us, when we are seeking knowledge, or when we have to delay instant gratification to achieve something greater. Sometimes it means that we are patient with the process of unlearning false beliefs about ourselves, God, and our path. Sometimes it means we will appear more distant and not as available. Sometimes it means we stop explaining ourselves and actions even if it means others will misconstrue our intentions. And this will require that we are patient with others not always understanding our journey right away. Very often, it will mean that we learn to place boundaries between the things and people that do not nourish our heart and serve us in this world and the next, and this will require that we are patient with the void that the absence of those people and things create. Sometimes it means we don't give our attention to every external stimuli, whether that is in our immediate environment or online, and this will require us to be patient with being bored at times, still, and quiet. Sometimes it means that what we say or do might not be accepted by the majority, and this will require that we are patient with not being validated or accepted. Every difficult choice we make on the path of transformation requires patience: patience with ourselves (with our heart as we nurture it and with our *nafs* as we tame it and deprive it), patience with God's plan, and patience with others. And it is this patience that will truly allow us to witness the greatest rewards, in this world and the next.

We can learn a lot about the journey of transformation and the importance of patience from the world around us, especially from trees. In fact, the transformation of trees taught me a lot on my own journey and is why I love long Autumn walks for so many reasons. The Fall season has always taught my heart so much. As the trees shed, it teaches me to shed, too, to unlearn and let go of what is false and no longer serves me. As each tree transforms on its own time – and slowly and gradually – I am reminded that change doesn't happen overnight and that we each are a work in progress. As the trees stand tall and strong, despite losing their leaves, it reminds me to stand firm, too, and not

let my worth be defined by what God allows me to lose or gain in life. And as I witness all the leaves drop in front of me, I remember that not one of those leaves can drop without God's knowledge and command. Then I remind myself that nothing in my life is happening without His knowledge and command, too. And that's the thing about this season: I learn to let go, be patient, and trust God at the same time, because that is exactly what the trees do.

The trees also teach us that transformation is a continuous journey and we need transformation and growth for as long as we are alive. Every year, trees shed their dead leaves, while many of us go years without shedding one false layer we have been carrying. It's a yearly and gradual event that the tree drops what no longer serves it. We should derive from this that the work of transformation, this work of living purposefully, truthfully, wholeheartedly, is not a destination we arrive at, but a practice and a muscle we have to continuously utilize and strengthen. It is not an overnight transformation, but a gradual and beautiful one, that slowly decorates our being as we choose God above ourselves, heart over ego, and truth over falsehood in many moments of our life. We see this gradualness in trees as well, for the most beautiful things do not happen overnight. When a tree begins to transform, not all of its leaves change at once. Not all of its dead leaves fall at once. It takes time. And every tree blooms in its own time. It doesn't let the timing of Spring or the growth of other trees rush or dictate its process. It doesn't bend in shame from comparison. It still stands tall knowing its time will come.

Trees teach us that it's okay to carry both parts at a given time: the parts of you that need to go, and the parts of you that still belong. But regardless of which phase of transformation you are in, remember to welcome all the parts of yourself. This is what true transformation and sacred authenticity embodies, an acceptance of what is true, even if what is true is something we do not like and want to change. The trees teach us that we can be a work in progress and still stand tall, whole, and beautiful.

Like trees, we shed *too*
The seasons change
And we lose what we knew
Like trees, we are shaken *too*
The seasons change
But we stand through
Like trees, we transform *too*
The seasons change
And we gain the new[113]

113 Poem by the author.

Trust God Throughout Your Journey

A key ingredient of being patient is trusting in God as you do the work to transform and grow. This translates to a strong belief that He will never let your efforts be lost. We need to trust in God that He is facilitating our growth and transformation even if we can't see it, just as we trust that He is allowing the sun to still rise and set even if the clouds veil us from witnessing it. Just because you are veiled from what you are seeking and working towards does not mean it doesn't exist, nor does it mean that God's help and plans for you are not in motion. He sees your efforts, is helping you, is rewarding you for every step you take, and is planning in service of your growth in ways you can't begin to imagine. You are growing even if you can't see it. He is molding you even if you can't feel it. And He is preparing something great for you even if right now you are veiled from witnessing it. But you have to keep showing up as *consistently* as you can, to what benefits you and serves you, while constantly renewing your trust and belief that not a single effort of yours ever goes in vain or is minimal in the sight of God. Every step forward you take, every struggle, and every obstacle you have to overcome to walk towards God, to care for your heart, and to tackle all the mental and emotional obstacles along the way, is seen and appreciated by God. Your efforts will never be lost with Him, as long as He is what you are ultimately seeking. God reminds us of this in the Qur'an, when He says: "*...I will not allow the deeds of any one of you to be lost, whether you are male or female, each is like the other (in rewards)*" (3:195).

Shhhh the Two *Shs* in Your Life: *Shaytan* & Shame

On our path towards God and all that serves our growth and healing, there are two "Shs" in life we have to work hard to conquer, so that they don't control us or keep us from the potential, success, progress, beauty, joy, and peace God holds for us. And they are: *Shaytan* & Shame.

Shame is *Shaytan*'s game. As mentioned earlier, I differentiate between toxic shame and the healthy kind of shame and immense humility we can feel in front of God when we disobey Him. Even the world of psychology recognizes that not all shame is bad, despite many messages we receive in our society today. Shame is a natural part of being human and what differentiates us from animals. And healthy shame can play a crucial role in us changing bad behavior that hurts us and others. Toxic shame, on the other hand, is not healthy, and can actually keep us from growth. It is the kind of shame that leads people to think they are innately flawed, worthless, and not worthy of love and belonging due to their mistakes and behaviors. And it can create an intense feeling of hopelessness. And this is why toxic shame is one of the greatest psychological tools that *Shaytan* uses, because you feeling hopeless is

his goal. *Shaytan* seeks to prevent you from seeing God's greater plan, and His love and mercy towards you when you need it most.

Many people develop toxic shame through trauma, childhood abuse, and messages they received throughout their lives that mistakes, imperfections, vulnerability, and fragility block us from love, acceptance, and belonging. Toxic shame is the shame we need to unlearn and heal from. The more we learn how to cope with and heal from toxic shame, the less of a powerful tool it becomes for *Shaytan* to use against us or to prevent us from moving forward towards God and all that serves us.

Shame and *Shaytan* both start with "Sh" so we remember to learn to *"shhhh"* them, which means learning how to actively cope with shame and stay strong against *Shaytan*, especially when we are trying to grow, heal, and transform. Too many times, people give up on their great intentions, hard work, and efforts, all because of one mistake or setback. People who struggle with this are (not always, but very often) attached to perfection, because *imperfection* triggers their toxic shame and makes them feel less-than, unworthy, unlovable or not enough. They have defined their worth and happiness by perfect measures of success for themselves. They are happiest and only feel worthy when they do everything perfectly and stick to "perfect" routines, and they are saddest and often feel empty and worthless, when they don't have a day that matches their idea of perfection. But perfectionism is an illusion, an illusion that Shaytan works hard to get our *nafs* attached to. As God tells us in the Qur'an, *"Shaytan only makes them (false) promises and deludes them with (empty) hopes. Truly Shaytan promises them nothing but delusion* (4:120)." One of the greatest of false promises that Shaytan presents to us is "perfectionism," for it doesn't exist, and our attachment to it creates great psychological stress, but also a lack of true progress and growth. And because shame is one of *Shaytan*'s greatest psychological tactics, he abuses this greatly to get you to always chase this false and "perfect" illusion of worth. And when anything happens that does not match this perfect and rigid image you defined for your self-worth, he will work hard to build upon your shame and tell you, "*you already messed up, what's the point of trying?*" or "*you might as well just not try at all.*" He will do everything he can to get you to not see all the efforts you already made and just keep you focused on this one setback. But while *Shaytan* wants you to lose hope and feel defeated, God wants you to always have hope and remember that He appreciates every effort and the tiniest good you do. As He tells us in the Qur'an, "*Shaytan (Satan) threatens you with poverty and commands you to depravity; whereas Allah (God) promises you His forgiveness from Himself and His grace. And Allah (God) is One Who is Extensive, Knowing.*" (2:268)

Remember that One of God's great names is *Ash-Shakur*, which means the Most Appreciative, the One who rewards abundantly for every small step you

take, every small good deed you do, and the One who gives without bounds. This Name is a powerful reminder that God always recognizes whatever small good exists within us or through any of our actions. He does not minimize any good we do. We make a lot of mistakes but for one small good deed, He gives to us abundantly. He gives us beyond what we deserve. And when He gives, He gives us more than what we expect. This is the name to access and remember when you feel shame because of a setback or when you are about to sabotage the progress you made. It reminds you to not minimize your worth or efforts, for God never does.

Love Your Path

Learn to love your path
Unconditionally, if you can
Not just for what it has
But for what you cannot stand

Your path is not a mistake
No compass has gone wrong
Nor is it by your make
So don't replay this "what if" song

Your path is a creation
Not fashioned by anyone but He
So know that all your stations
Are because He said "Be"

Learn to love your path
For all it contains
Do not let it feel your wrath
When it brings you pains

Your path is not incomplete
Nor is it one-sided
It may at times have been bleak
But it also was lighted

The same path of adversity
Also came with relief
And as it brought you scarcity
It also set you up to receive

The same path that made you sad
Also brought you much bliss
And when you felt like a nomad
The truth did your soul reminisce

Your path is not flawed
Nor is it wrongly scaled
All is measured by God
But remember you are veiled

He is always paving your way
Regardless of what you see
So keep walking, do not sway
Hold Him as your Trustee

His knowledge is supreme
His love for you is vast
So ignore what may seem
And seek what will always last

Your path will always change
No station lasts forever
So as you rearrange
Always seek His pleasure

Learn to love your path
For it is meant to be a guide
To the One, who is First and Last
Who has never left your side[114]

114 Poem by the author.

11

Living By H.O.M.E.
Reorient The Heart Towards Its Highest Value So It *Can* Lead

If we hold a compass, and we see that it is pointing in any direction other than the earth's highest point, which is north (and not west, east, or south), we know it can't accurately lead us to where we are going. We know we can't trust giving it the position of leading our direction until it is pointing north again. Similarly, the heart being like a compass, can only guide us if it is reoriented to its Highest Point and Value, its True North. A heart that doesn't point to God as its highest point and value, can't be trusted to lead. Therefore, we need to constantly do the work of pointing our heart to its True North, so it can be a great inner compass and leader within our being.

Give Back The Heart Its Rightful Position of Leader

Without God as the greatest Source of guidance and nourishment, a leader cannot lead or guide in a way that serves those he or she is guiding. Similarly, for the heart to take back its rightful position of leader within our psycho-spiritual system, and for it to lead the mind and ego effectively, it needs a strong and direct relationship to its Source, to God, the One who made this heart to know Him, connect to Him, and be nourished and guided by Him.

Every system has a leader. Whether it is the family system, an organizational system, or a societal system, every system needs a rightful leader for it to function effectively and experience harmony. The rightful leader of the psycho-spiritual system is the heart. But to give the position of leadership to the heart, we must first understand the sacred role of leadership. Just like any true leader, the heart has to be properly nourished in order to serve effectively and lead others. The heart needs to be taken care of, day in and day out, if it is to effectively lead the mind and ego, and be able to serve the *ruh*. To understand this, we can look to the best of leaders who walked this earth, and that is Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). In 1978, Michael Hart – an American author, researcher, and historian – wrote a book titled *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*, where he extensively researched and ranked the 100 most influential leaders in the world. It is not a surprise that the person he ranked first as the most influential person in history was our

beloved Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). Michael Hart, in explaining why he chose Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) in his book, said: "*My choice of Muhammad to lead the list of the world's most influential persons may surprise some readers and may be questioned by others, but he was the only man in history who was supremely successful on both the religious and secular level.*"

Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) was the best of leaders to walk this earth, and his ability to lead others so beautifully and powerfully was because he was nourished so beautifully and powerfully by his Creator. God is the Source of every true leader's nourishment and that includes the heart. The heart's Source of nourishment is God, and its ability to lead the mind and ego depends on its continuous link to its Creator. Only when the heart is nourished properly, can the mind not be burdened and feel secure in its position as servant. Only when the heart gains its security from God does the ego have no need to come to the surface to compensate for any insecurity within our being.

The heart, just like any great leader, needs God. It needs to continuously be linked to the Source of its nourishment. It needs to be conscious of Him, for that is what allows it to lead beautifully. Similarly, a man who is not conscious of God being watchful of Him can become forgetful of his duties and the role He was given by God to fulfill, and will be asked about when He returns to Him. The heart's *taqwa,* its connection to God being watchful of it, is crucial for it to lead beautifully and powerfully, and be able to say no to the *nafs* when need be, or humble the mind and redirect it to God when need be as well. The heart is what commands all the other entities within the system. It is there to guide, provide essential knowledge, and direct all the other entities appropriately and in a way that serves our higher self, the *ruh.*

Islam has taught us this great power of the heart 1400 years ago, that only recently researchers have started to acknowledge. In the Qur'an and *sunnah,* you will see many messages and teachings that spoke to the *fadl* that God has given the heart and its great power to orient and impact all other entities within our being. This is the part of us that we turn to for direction, for it has a great power to connect directly to *Al-Hadi,* the One who Guides. This is the part of us we should consult, like a child consults a parent, an employee consults a supervisor, or a soldier consults a commander. In fact, consulting our heart was advice that Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) gave, when he was asked by one of the companions, Wabsiah ibn Ma'bad, about "righteousness and sin." He (ﷺ) responded by striking his chest with his fist and said, "*Consult your soul, consult your heart, O Wabisah. Righteousness is what reassures your soul and your heart, and sin is what wavers in your soul and puts tension in your chest, even if people approve it in their judgments again and again.*"[115]

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115 *Sunan al-Dārimī,* 2575.

But for us to consult our heart, we have to first make sure that our heart is connected to the right source. A leader's source matters. If a husband's source of nourishment and guidance is not God, then his source of guidance will be something that will not be able to sustain his leadership. Instead of God, he will turn to his own ego, other people, his status, his strength, or his wealth for guidance on how he is leading his family. We, ourselves, are not programmed to be the source of anything, for we are creation, not the Creator. We are not the lord of ourselves. We are limited in our capacity to give, and need constant access to God's unlimited capacity to give. God has an infinite supply of what we need and we need God like an infant needs its mother.

Every Day, God Needs To Be Your Heart's Highest Value

The heart can only lead when it worships the one, true God – not any false idol, whether that false idol be love, our *nafs*, egos, desires, people, careers, status, or anything else. If it worships anything else but its Creator, the heart leads us astray. It cannot become a leader, for by definition, a leader is one who guides others. And a heart that is devoted to anything above God cannot truthfully guide us in life. God has to be the highest value for the heart. We only have one Lord (*ilah*), for we do not possess two hearts, and therefore we cannot have two things we deem our highest value. God tells us in the Qur'an: "*Allah (God) has not made for a man two hearts in his interior*" (33:4). In psychology, we recognize the truth that every person in this world has a god. Every person has something they have identified as their highest value. Carl Jung, Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who was the founder of Analytical Psychology, said, "*God always denotes the highest value...the optimum of psychological vitality.*"[116] Despite his criticism of religion, he understood that one's image of God (or what one identifies as their god) is a fundamental component of the human psyche and has strong ties to the development of the self.[117]

Everyone worships something. Everyone has a god, a highest value in their life that they are devoted to, that they look to, to form their understanding of their *self* and the world they live in. In fact, the natural reaction to the heart having a highest value is for the heart to worship that highest value. If you look up the word "worship," you will see it being defined by words like *devotion*, *adoration*, *admiration*, *reverence* and *honor*. These are the words that perfectly describe how someone interacts with what they deem in this world to be their highest value. For example, there is a well-known phrase that describes one

116 Jung, C. G. (1976).

117 Jung, C. G. (1959).

whose highest value is their romantic partner, and that is: "he worships the ground she walks on."

Every single person has that which they hold to be the highest value, and their decision to revolve their life, their actions, and choices around that value is what is called worship. Everybody worships something. Every single person has a god. For example, some people worship people, or idols. As God tells us in the Qur'an: "*Do they associate with Him those who create nothing and they are (themselves) created?*" (7:191). Some people worship success, fame, or status. Some people worship fashion, music, or entertainment. Some people worship their desires. In fact, God speaks of those who have taken their own desires as their lords: "*Have you seen the one who takes as his god his own desire?*" (Qur'an, 25:43). Some people worship themselves. Some people worship Satan. I myself have worked with clients who told me that Satanism is their religion. In today's world, people may deny God and religion, not realizing that they are practicing a religion themselves, except who they worship is not their true Creator. Today, the worship of the self, desires, emotions, Satan, the mind, and intellectualism are some of the greatest religions of the modern day.

Whether people realize it or not, they are worshiping something. If it is not the true God, it's a false god. The heart is programmed to look for a highest value, for the heart is the greatest tool of devotion. But it is up to us to make sure that we devote it to the one true Lord.

> "*And your god is one Allah (God). There is no deity (worthy of worship) except Him, the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful.*" (Qur'an, 9:108)

The longing or inclination to hold something as our highest value has always been embedded within us. It is this inclination that, with reflection and effort, is supposed to drive us to the One who created us, the only One who is worthy of worship, worthy of being the Highest Value – for He creates from nothing, for the heavens and the earth and everything in between belongs to Him, for nothing can exist without Him. And until we understand that every message God sent down from Ibrahim, to Ya'kub, to Musa, to Issa, and finally to Muhammed (ﷺ) was to help us navigate our way to Him, to revolve our life around Him, and to understand that we will be returned to Him, we will continue to hold false gods as our highest value. Like a mirage in the desert, false gods will be something we continue to chase thinking they will quench that longing within our heart, until we arrive at nothing, finding ourselves without energy, and still very much thirsty. Our heart will always long for more until it finds its Source. Until then, its thirst will never be quenched, it will never be satisfied, and it will never be at peace.

If other than God
is our Highest Value,
the heart is cut off
from its true Source.
Only when the heart
is connected to its Source
can our entire being
be ignited with a beautiful force.[118]

Whenever we have given anything other than God the position of highest value, we suffer. This is why *shirk* is a great sin in Islam, because it causes great suffering for the person who commits it. *Shirk* is the Arabic word for "*associating partners with God.*" It is essentially when we give anything the same value as God. *Shirk* is the exact opposite of *tawheed*, belief in the Oneness of God, that He has no son, wife, partners, and nothing is like him. In fact, when we study *aqeedah* (Islamic creed), one of the foundational truths about God that we learn from the Qur'an is that "*Nothing is like Him.*"[119]

Nothing is like God, in any shape, form, or value. The Creator cannot be like His creation. And we understand this in our human experience. Can the creator of a copy machine be equated with the copy machine? Can Steve Jobs and the iPhone have the same value? Of course not. Then how can we give anything the same value as God, who created every single breath, object, land, ocean, heaven, and the entire universe? Nothing can be compared to Him. And there is no God, but He. *Shirk* is when the heart has more than one God, more than one thing it deems its highest value, more than one thing it is the most devoted to. But many times, people understand *shirk* as solely in reference to the act of saying God has a son (i.e., "*Jesus is the son of God*"). But *shirk*, at its core, is giving *anything* the same value as God. It is the act of giving the position of "*highest value*" to any god except the One, True God.

When the heart has none other than God as its "highest value," it has truly embodied the experience and act of Islam. Islam is an Arabic word that literally means "surrendering" or "submitting." It is the practice of devoting oneself to God, and not placing anything else in the position only designed for God. This is the very choice and testimonial of faith every Muslim makes, whether he or she is born into Muslim families or converted to Islam. We chose to bear witness to God's truth, that He is our highest value, that He is the One we worship, submit to, surrender to, and devote ourselves to. That is the essence of the testimonial (*shahada*) that one recites to even *be* a Muslim,

118 Poem by the author.

119 Qur'an, 42:11.

which is: "*I bear witness that there is no god worthy of worship except God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God.*" By saying this statement sincerely, we are bearing witness to the truth of our Creator, that there is no one worthy of worship but Him, and that Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) was sent with our Creator's truths and is the final messenger in a line of messengers who also were sent to relay the same truths.

Increase in the Zikr of *"la illah ila Allah"*

The testimonial (*shahada*) is an act of accepting God's truths and choosing to be people who are witnesses (*shahideen*) to His truths above their desires, people, society – anything other than God. For a Muslim, one who claims the testimonial of faith, "*la illah ila Allah,*" (No god except Allah) identifies God, the One True Creator of all that exists in the heavens and the earth as their highest value. The order of "*la illah ila Allah*" itself has a purifying component within it that guides our mind and heart to negate and detach from anything we give the same value as God. The statement itself protects us from *shirk* (associating partners with God). If you notice, we say "there is *no* god or deity" ("*la illah*") before we say "except Allah" ("*ila Allah*"). This means that before we affirm who our One God and Lord we Worship is, we first negate any other "god." In our very testimonial, we reject and negate all false gods, and in doing so, we are intentionally ensuring that we do not give any other thing, person, object, or goal – even ourselves – the same value as God. This is why we are reminded to engage in the *zikr* of "*la illah ila Allah*" frequently, as Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us: *The best remembrance is to declare there is no God but Allah (la illah ila Allah). The best supplication is to declare all praise is due to Allah (God).*"[120]

By frequently connecting our hearts and tongues to this testimonial each day, our soul remembers its promise and commitment to its Creator. As you learned so far, our souls entered into the covenant of "*la illah ila Allah*" before we were born into this world, and therefore, God's truth is familiar to our souls. As God tells us in the Qur'an: "*When your Lord asked all the offspring of Adam (before their birth), 'Am I not your Lord?' all of them testified and bore witness to their testimony that on the Day of Judgment they would not say, 'We were not aware of this (fact).*" (Qur'an, 7:172)

Renewing our connection to the truth that God is our highest value, through continuously nourishing and filling our hearts with the *zikr* (or remembrance) of "*la illah ila Allah,*" is the essence of *living* by the H.O.M.E. Method. By choosing to be Muslim, we are confirming the promise our souls made before it was placed in our human body. By being Muslim, we are choosing to submit

120 *Sunan al-Tirmidhī,* 3383.

to God and His truths throughout our journey in this world. Essentially, a Muslim is one who accepts God's invitation to truth. We testified to God before this journey started and by choosing to be Muslim, we are remembering, confirming, and living out the truth we testified to. And with every "*la illah ila Allah*" we repeat daily in our lives, we are renewing that covenant and accepting to live by that truth each day, guarding our heart from making anything our highest value except God.

Through living by "*la illah ila Allah*," throughout our human experience, it is our hope that at the end of our journey on this earth, our soul returns to God, confirming and bearing witness to this truth just as it did before this journey started. The hope of every Muslim is to be able to recite the testimonial (*shahada*) during our final moments on this earth. But we know from our tradition that bearing witness to the truth in our final moments will only be easy for someone who bore witness to God's truths (not simply through words, but through their hearts and actions) throughout their lives. Not everyone is blessed with the ability to recite the testimonial in their last few moments of life, for it is not a matter of the tongue, but a matter of the heart.

> "*There is no soul that died bearing witness to La ilaha illallah, and that I am the Messenger of Allah (God), from the heart with certainty, but Allah (God) will forgive it.*"[121] — Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ)

If our heart is disconnected from God's truth throughout our journey in this world, it will be disconnected from it as we exit it. And in the trial and difficulty of death, only truth can help a person. Falsehood offers us nothing in reality and our trials, tests, and difficult moments in life reveal that. If we try to lean on something that was not true in our hearts during difficult moments, it will not help us. This is why even an atheist will call upon God in their most difficult of calamities or a life-or-death situation. Because their falsehood of denying God could not help them when the reality (*haqiqah*) of their need for God is revealed to them through hardship. This is exemplified in the following Qur'anic verse: "*And when waves come over them like canopies, they invoke Allah (God), sincere to Him in religion. But when He delivers them to the land, there are (some) of them who are moderate (in faith). And none rejects Our signs except everyone treacherous and ungrateful*" (31:32).

Truth is revealed in the hardest of times. Only a heart that testifies to truth can guide a tongue to claim that truth during such a difficult moment in life as approaching death. And there is no experience more true, real, or difficult than death. It is very easy, though, to lose a connection to this testimonial we made. We can easily forget the essence of who we are if we do not take the time to reflect upon what it means to be a Muslim. In addition, I find

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121 *Sunan Ibn Majah*, 3796.

that many of us have not even reflected upon the fact that being Muslim is a choice we made, and that choice has to be free of cultural influences and the expectations of others (parents, community, etc.). It has to be a sincere choice for God alone. We cannot choose to pray, wear hijab, or do any act of worship because our parents told us to, because our communities expect us to, or because we have an image to maintain. Being a Muslim requires a sincere intention and conscious choice to align ourselves with God's truths over anybody else's "truth" or expectations.

We are a creation that was given free will. By choosing to be Muslim, we chose to align our free will with God and His truth. That is what one who submits to God does. They surrender to God's truths. They prioritize God's truths above their desires, people, society, or anyone or anything other than God. God becomes the heart's highest value. This is how the heart can lead so beautifully and powerfully: by us constantly freeing it from the *nafs* and the pressures of the external world, while reorienting it to God, just as we would reorient a compass north. Every day is a struggle to point this heart to its Highest Value, to ensure that nothing else becomes more valuable to it. There are so many distractions, so many pressures and influences (inward and outward), but this is the struggle of the human experience.

If we did not have this struggle we would be like angels. But angels did not choose free will. They chose full submission. They worship God in every moment, state, and phase, in a world void of egos, distractions, and imperfection. We are in this lower world, an imperfect world, and a temporary human experience full of egos, desires, and *Shaytan* and his followers. But because we have a greater struggle than the angels, we have the ability to be elevated higher than them. This is a truth taught to us through the event of *Isra' Al ma'raj*, the Prophet's (ﷺ) ascension to the heavens. As Jibreel (Gabriel, عليه السلام) himself was ascending with the Prophet (ﷺ) through the heavens, there came a point where Jibreel, the greatest of angels, could not surpass, and the Prophet (ﷺ), a human like us, was able to ascend further.[122] It is this inner struggle of giving the heart its rightful place of leadership and constantly working to ensure that God remains its highest value, that prepares us for the greatest of destinations in the heavens.

But to arrive at this most perfect world, we have to beautifully navigate this human experience and all its imperfection. To do so, we have to lead from the heart, and to lead from the heart, we have to constantly redirect it back to God, like we redirect ourselves to the *Kaaba* during *tawaf*. When Muslims go to complete *umrah* or *hajj* in Makkah, they circle the *Kaaba* and this is called *tawaf*. *Tawaf* teaches us the power of focusing on the Creator despite all the

122 Qadi 'Iyad (2010), p. 107.

tests and influences we face on our path. For example, a great test on our path will be people, and in *tawaf*, we witness this test as we try to worship God alongside thousands of people. Some will push, some will be inconsiderate of your space, some will be impatient, some will not show respect, some will even distract you from doing this most sacred act of worship.

But every time we are tested and we look at the *Kaaba*, we remember our center point, we remember why we are here. We remember that this was an invitation. We remember the Owner of the house we were invited to. We remember our purpose. We remember that we are not here to stay. And so, despite the unruliness we may witness at times during *tawaf*, and despite the challenges we face as a result of being with so many people in one space, something powerful happens when we shift our physical eye back to the *Kaaba* and reorient the eye of our heart back to God, remembering that He is the Greatest and our Highest Value: He makes everything else background noise.

With our hearts in the lead focused on its Creator, God lets everything else become secondary. With Him as our priority, He doesn't allow what is secondary to shake us, break us, or hurt us. Instead, He guides our hearts to view everything else, every interaction with His creation, as a means to being closer to Him. The shoves, the impatience of others, the lack of consideration, or any other challenge we face no longer holds a weight compared to what we gain by focusing on God. And while this is a lesson from *tawaf*, it extends to our everyday life. When we face various struggles and tests on our path in this world, we should train our heart to shift its lens back to God, and engage in the *zikr* of "*la illah ila Allah*." In doing so, we remember the Owner of all hearts. We remember our purpose. We remember that our time in this world is temporary, and that we are not here to stay. And as we prioritize God, He will make all that bothers us secondary and it will no longer hold a weight compared to what we gain from seeking and focusing on God.

Center Your Day Around Your 5 Meetings With God (*Salah*)

We also have the opportunity to reorient our inner compass back to its Highest Value, through our five meetings with God each day. These are 5 opportunities every day where we show up for the claim of "*la illah ila Allah,*" and affirm our devotion to our Highest Value. When we go to pray, we place God above anything else we at times *deceive* ourselves to believe is our highest value (i.e., work, people, worries, distractions). Prayer is the most powerful act and practice of affirming our Highest Value, and each day we revolve our tasks and duties around our prayers (and not the other way around), we are essentially revolving ourselves around God, circulating our heart around God, just as beautifully as one's body circulates around the *Kaaba*. By revolving each day around our prayers, we are affirming our belief that God is our Greatest

Value and Concern, and emptying it of anything else it has heedlessly given the same value as Him. In fact, a great practice to implement is scheduling your day around your five prayers. This is a great exercise that my students have found to be very helpful in training their hearts to make God its Highest Value. This exercise requires that you make a daily plan (in your notebook or designated daily planner) with the first step being to write down the prayer times for that day before you fill in anything else you have to do that day. After this, you can then fill in everything else you need to do. This on its own trains the mind and heart that God is our first priority, and everything else comes second.

The Practice of *Taqwa*

In addition, *taqwa*, the practice of being conscious (or mindful) of God as we speak or behave in the presence or absence of others, is a practice designed to direct the heart to its Highest Value. *Taqwa* is so powerful that the more you practice it, the more you find yourself living so authentically. That is because when *taqwa* is a priority and you are mindful of God in the absence of people, you start to become mindful of Him in their presence. God's opinion becomes greater than monitoring the impression of His creation. As a result, the truth of "*la illah ila Allah*," in your heart begins to appear in your words and actions. And the space between what your heart believes and what you actually claim and do, begins to disappear. In the end, just like in *tawaf*, we have an opportunity each day, through the practice of *taqwa*, to direct the eye of our heart back to God and remember that nothing should be given the same value as Him, not people, not anything. Every day we have an opportunity to revisit our covenant of "*la illah ila Allah*." Only then, can the heart truly lead and be a beautiful home within that reflects the most sacred and powerful of truths and light.

Key Practice Tips

1. Make it a habit to say "*la illah ila Allah*" at least 10 times a day. As you do so, practice meditating and actively reflecting on what unhealthy attachments or false idols you are freeing yourself from as you say "*la illah*" (there is no deity), before you affirm in your heart "*ila Allah*" (except God). After you are done, do not forget to ask for God's help with freeing you from what you have identified no longer serves you.
2. Each day, make a daily plan that centers and revolves around your 5 meetings with God (*salah*). And be sure to set up the *athan* (call to prayer) on your phone or in your home.

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Living By H.O.M.E.
Recalibrate the Heart So It *Maintains* Its Position of Leader

What helps a compass accurately read where the north direction is, is the magnet within it. The needle of the compass consists of a magnet that is pulled towards the northern magnetic pull of the earth. But the magnet's ability to accurately read the north direction can be altered by what we place in the orbit of the compass. For example, when we place a compass near metal objects like wristwatches, metal tables, keys, or screws, the magnet of its needle starts to point in their direction. Any of these metal objects can deflect the magnet away from its true north, and the needle starts to point to a "false north." As a result, the compass gives us a false reading.

A heart, like a compass, is also sensitive to external factors within its magnetic field and the different pulls of its orbiting world. And while its inner magnet is designed to respond to the strong pull of its Creator and its alignment with the *ruh*, what we feed our heart, expose it to, and place in its proximity, can affect its ability to accurately read its northern direction: the direction of God and all that the *ruh* (or higher self) needs to thrive. It starts to point to a false north and, as a result, gives us false readings. But it's not just the pull of the world and its shiny "metal objects" that can deflect the heart's compass to give us false readings. The pull of our lower self (*nafs*) can also do the same. Both the influences of our lower self and this lower world can pull the heart away from our higher self and the higher world we are destined for. As a result, our heart points to false norths and gives us false guidance.

When this happens, when the heart's north is false and its resulting guidance and direction becomes *also* false, its ability to lead becomes compromised. For the heart to lead again, it needs recalibration, just as a compass needs recalibration when its north is also false. Recalibrating an instrument like a compass is defined as making changes to it so that its measurements or readings become accurate again or, in other words, its truthful settings become restored. We need to do the same with the heart, whenever we find ourselves being led by our lower self (the *nafs*), this lower world (the *dunya*), or the influences of *Shaytan*. Recalibration of the heart is also about making changes to it so that its readings and guidance become accurate, and therefore, we can trust it to lead again.

This journey we are on is not just about our heart *attaining* its leadership position, but also about *maintaining* the heart's leadership when it is pulled in any direction other than north. And this is inevitable. As mentioned previously, the *qalb*'s nature is to flip, to face different directions. And our greatest responsibility in this world is to constantly care for it and to keep guiding its direction back to its true north: God and all that the *ruh* needs to be awakened. Our most sacred responsibility is *this*, until we return home. It is the continuous recalibration of our heart's compass by prioritizing its nourishment and God-given prescriptions, so it aligns with the needs of our higher self. As a result, when our inner compass is recalibrated, our truthful settings – our *fitrah* settings – become restored.

Restore Your *Fitrah* Settings

Our journey in this world is constantly about restoring our *fitrah*. *Fitrah* is the concept in Islam that refers to the pure and truthful state we all were born with and entered this world with. It is the state of goodness, inner freedom, peace, authenticity and truthfulness (*sidq*), and an alignment with God's truths. But this world – the way we journey through and interact with and interpret our struggles and experiences in it – can lead us to becoming more and more distanced from God and this beautiful state of *fitrah* we all came into this world with. As a result, we carry layers that do not belong to us. We build walls between us and all that serves us. We forget just how much we need God, and how sweet it is to re-center ourselves around Him. But as we begin to redirect our heart back to Him, to re-center ourselves around what He has called us to, we begin to feel a return to that beautiful state of *fitrah*. We begin to feel a restoration of who we always were and who God wants us to be. And as we remember God, we remember and awaken to what serves us, not only spiritually, but also mentally and emotionally. As we remember and prioritize what the heart needs in order to align itself with our *fitrah* and higher self, we become more at peace, more whole, more nourished, more awakened, and more free. As a result, we return home to ourselves and what serves our holistic well-being.

Cultivate a Strong *Heartset*, Not Just Mindset

Everything you have learned so far and will continue to learn through the H.O.M.E Method is about training you to *set* this heart in the right direction, just as we would set a compass in the right direction. This is why a key concept and term in the H.O.M.E Method is cultivating a strong *heartset*, for leading from the heart requires that each day we prioritize setting the heart in the direction of all that serves its nourishment and our higher self. But in the world

we live in, there is greater emphasis on cultivating the right mindset, where we focus on setting the mind in the right direction, while the heart's setting is left neglected. Our heart, above all else, needs to be set, *too*, in the right direction: in the direction of God, all that He prescribed for it as nourishment, and all that serves us spiritually, mentally, and emotionally. This is what it means to cultivate a strong *heartset*. By doing so, we are prioritizing the well-being of our soul which needs to be fueled properly for it to have not only a successful journey, but a successful return.

To prioritize the nourishment of any aspect of our being, we must first understand how that aspect needs to be nourished. Each facet within our psycho-spiritual system seeks different things. The *nafs* seeks comfort, desires, self-importance, and pleasure. The mind seeks comprehension, understanding, organization, and rationalization. The heart, on the other hand, needs key things that nourish it beautifully. The heart receives its nourishment from God and all that which is in line with His truths. Therefore, the heart needs a constant link to God, for nothing will satisfy or nourish the heart like the One who made it. If we do not connect to this on a very deep level, we will continue to seek our heart's nourishment through false sources that will never provide it with what it needs. And the heart will not be *set* in the right direction. It will become neglected, malnourished, leaving the seat of leader open for the *nafs* or mind to overtake. Without the heart receiving its proper nourishment, we cannot be aligned with our *fitrah,* the state of our higher self (our *ruh*).

Lead a Pure & Good Life

To serve our higher self, we have to have *higher* standards. While our lower self can accept any action, true or not, good or not, our higher self has higher standards, and only accepts the actions that are truthful, good, and pure. Therefore, if we lead a pure and good life full of actions that please God, the heart is turned to face the *ruh* and we become aligned with our higher self. If we lead a life that serves the *nafs*, the heart turns to face the *nafs*. For the heart to lead and be aligned with our higher self, we need to lead a life that is pure and good.

We all want to live a pure and good life. And many of us are looking for a fresh start, a new beginning, and in our deepest hearts we want to live a life of truthfulness, sacredness, and purity that feels good inwardly, and not just one that looks good outwardly. But what does a pure and good life look like? You see, in our world today we are constantly being inundated with messages to chase the "good" life. Especially on social media, many people follow pages that are constantly telling them that the "good" life comes when they buy this or that, look a certain way, have more comforts, travel more, live in this or that

kind of house, make their homes aesthetically and perfectly beautiful, or when they practice self-care a certain way. Many people today are chasing a certain lifestyle portrayed on social media, and oftentimes, they are still left feeling empty-hearted, more anxious, confused, and feeling a lack of grounding and peace. This is because an insta-fancy or popular lifestyle isn't what is going to produce for you long-lasting and real inward fruits. It won't create the most valuable treasures in the heart: peace, wholeness, and nourishment. This is something only God, the Source of All Peace (*As-Salam*) can give. No matter how much we decorate our homes, buy fancy things, travel the world, acquire material wealth, or go to spas in the name of self-care, our true inner peace, joy, and a pure and good life are not rooted in what we acquire externally, but in what we build within and in what we do. God teaches us this truth very clearly. In fact, in the Qur'an, God teaches us what creates a good and pure life, when He says: "*Whoever works righteousness (or does good deeds), man or woman, and has faith, verily, to him will We give a* ***new life****, a life that is* ***good and pure*** *and We will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions*" (6:97). In this verse is the key to the new beginning you are looking for. In this verse is the key to the good and pure life you have been seeking and your heart very desperately needs. The answer lies in redirecting our mind and heart to doing the good deeds most pleasing to God. This verse teaches us to direct our heart to what matters and start asking ourselves the necessary questions: Are our prayers on time? Do we give in charity? Do we help others? Do we speak good words? Do we speak the truth? Do we revolve our day around God? Do we structure our day around our prayers, or do we structure our prayers around our day? Are we good to our parents and kin? Are we grateful for our blessings? Are we intentional and present with our actions? Are our intentions God-centered or *nafs*-centered?

The Qur'an teaches us the many actions that produce a pure and good life. It teaches us that it's not what we acquire outwardly that beautifies us inwardly. It is the opposite. It is the beauty that we cultivate within that transforms our outward lifestyle. But oftentimes, people are influenced to start outward, to look outside of them, for what can only be found within. The key to a good and pure life starts by connecting to what our Creator has *told us* creates a good and pure life. It starts with reigniting a connection to His words. And it starts with doing the work of building the muscle of turning inward and being present with God, one's heart, blessings, strengths, emotions, and how one can utilize what they have been given to do good deeds in this world. Only then can we truly experience the sweetness of a truly *pure* and *good* life.

Prioritize the Prescriptions & Practices of the Heart

The heart receives its fuel and nourishment from actions and practices that serve the soul, the part of us that is not from this world and belongs to a world far greater. To learn of the practices that truly serve our higher self, we have to search amongst the truths that God provided us, through the Qur'an and *sunnah*. If God created the heart to seek Him – if He designed and programmed the heart to long for Him and connect to Him – then it only makes sense that the heart will respond to the actions that He prescribed as the means for the heart to achieve that purpose. The acts of *ibadah* (or worship), are designed by God to nourish the heart in a way nothing else can. So when we approach acts of worship, we should approach it first and foremost as *I am obeying God's command*, but also, as *I am fulfilling the needs of my heart and soul.* The quality of our acts of worship completely transforms when we realize we are *in need* of it and it's not something God needs from us.

Revive Your Connection to Your Prayers

First and foremost, the heart *needs* prayer. Amongst the prescriptions and acts of worship that nourish the heart, prayer is the greatest form. We know that God did not command us to pray because He gains or needs anything from our prayers. We know prayer is for us. *We* need it. It is our life line. The spiritual body needs prayer like the physical body needs water. Prayer is hydration for the soul. It is what quenches its thirst for the Source of its light and the illuminated world it came from. It is what rehydrates it when our spiritual reservoir has dried up. Our mind understands this (as many of us have awareness that prayer is important), but our hearts need to deeply understand this if it is to be nourished by our prayers. There is a disconnect between our mind and our heart. We know we *need* prayer, but this truth has not resonated in our hearts, and the state of our prayer reflects that. When we are rushing our prayers, squeezing them into our life, and lacking focus and presence during them, we need to ask ourselves this question: *If I truly know that I am in need of this prayer, and this prayer benefits me, why am I praying as if it is God that needs this from me?* As if we are saying, *There, God, I did it – I'm going to get back to my life now.* This suggests that we are giving something to God and walking away with nothing for ourselves, when in fact the opposite truth is happening. God gains nothing from our prayers, and it is us that walk away nourished and fueled, ready to face the world.

A rushed prayer without focus or presence is a prayer we are cruising through to get done so that we can mentally check off an obligation. And while it is a command from God and a duty, we must remember that God commanded it because *we* need it, because of His love for us, because that is our strongest link

to Him and He never wants us to be cut off from Him on this journey back to Him. And the consequence is heavy because that is how badly we need it. Until we understand that everything God has commanded us to do is *because* of His love for us and *because* we are the ones in need constantly of His closeness, His guidance, and bounty, we will continue having a relationship with God that is limited and confined to mental checklists. Our inability to step outside this business-type relationship with God deprived of love, connection, and heart, is truly the ultimate loss. Therefore, when we learn to pray, we should not just teach our limbs the motions.The real goal is teaching our hearts to pray. We need to develop hearts that know how to pray.

When you stand in prayer, let your heart take the lead. Don't assume your mind knows better. Redirect the thoughts and let your heart absorb, feel and connect without the constant analysis. Our mind is constantly telling our hearts how it *should* feel. But there is a time and place for everything. There is a time to hold yourself into account and reflect on your prayer and its state, and there is a time to just be present and let your heart be in the moment. In those moments, when you are standing in front of your Creator, give your heart a chance to gain strength and navigate its way. It knows what to do. Prayer is the heart's center stage and on that stage, it knows the role it was born to play. It was born to connect, to be present, to feel the presence of God in every movement. Do not deprive your heart of leading this sacred performance it was called to 5 times a day.

It starts with little steps and little moments where you connect to the energy that exists within this most noble and powerful tool within your being. It starts with reflecting on the longing that it is embedded within it for the One who made it. Outside of prayer, reflect much on this longing. Remember how this longing drove Ibrahim in a time of idolatry to think the moon and the sun were his lord, until his heart recognized the Truth. Understand that this heart will always long to connect with its Source and know that the most powerful form of connection we have is prayer which in Arabic (*salah*) comes from the word "link" or "connection" (*sillah*). Out of love for us, He gave us prayer so we are never left alone, never cut off, and always connected to Him on this journey back to Him.

Practice Connecting to the Powerful Energy & Longing of Your Heart

Know that your heart was programmed to respond to Him. He is already familiar to each of our hearts. And if you ever doubt that, place your hand over your heart and repeat God's name in Arabic, "*Allah*." This alone will show you just how powerfully this heart responds to God. You will feel your heart

vibrate in the most soothing way. There are miracles in the Arabic language and there is no coincidence in where its letters are pronounced from. In the Arabic language, each letter has a place which it is pronounced from, called *makhārij al-ḥurūf* (which translates to "places letters are emitted from"). These places are the lips, tongue, nose, throat, and mouth. For example, the "kha" (خ) and "ghayn" (غ) letters are pronounced from the top (or start) of the throat, while the letter "meem" (م) is pronounced from the lips. The name *Allah* in Arabic has 4 letters (*alif, lam, lam, ha*). The first and last letters, "*alif*" (ا) and "*ha*" (ه) are pronounced from the end or bottom of the throat, not from the top or middle of the throat. I always found this so beautiful, that out of all the *makhārij*, the starting and ending of God's name is pronounced from the *makhraj* (or place) that is closest to the heart. The bottom of the throat is the lowest *makhraj* of all the Arabic letters, and in fact, the only letters in this *makhraj* (the bottom of the throat), are the letters "*alif*" and "*ha*" the beginning and end of God's name, Allah. This is not a coincidence. But if you don't believe me, here is a great practice you can do right now: place your hand on your heart, and start repeating "Allah," and you will feel the most soothing vibration near your heart. Let your heart show you this truth. This is a great practice to awaken yourself to the powerful energy of your heart and its longing for God. In fact, it is a practice I often utilize in my guided meditations with my students and every single time, students are in awe of how powerfully the heart physically responds to the name of its Creator. The heart is programmed to open in the presence of His name, and to close in its absence. It is programmed to long for Him and is comforted by His remembrance. But we have to connect to this longing. We have to acknowledge it and be present with it. And there is no better time to do that than when we are going to pray.

"*And to your Lord, direct your longing.*" (Qur'an, 94:8)

Key Practice Tip

Before each prayer, pause and practice remembering that this heart longs for God, so that you can go to prayer with that longing, remembering that God is your Greatest Love, and every prayer is a meeting between you and your Beloved. Every prayer is a union between the heart and Who it always most deeply longs for. Place your hand on your heart, repeat "Allah," and remember how much it *needs* Him before every prayer.

Stick to a Daily *Zikr* Diet

Forgetfulness is an attribute of the human being. In fact, the Arabic words for "human being" and "to forget" have similar root letters and therefore sound very similar to one another. The Arabic word for "human being" is "*insan*" and the Arabic word for "to forget," is "*nasa*," both containing root letters of "n" (ن) and "s" (س). If we say "the human being forgets" in Arabic, we will say "*al insan yansa.*" Both words sound so similar, reminding us of the strong link between forgetfulness and this human experience we all are journeying through. But while forgetfulness is an attribute of the human being, it of course is not an attribute of God. God never forgets us, but we are often forgetful of Him, and that is why we *need zikr*. We need to constantly remember Him. The heart *needs zikr* to serve our higher self beautifully, for the soul requires *zikr* for energy like the body requires the right food for energy.

Zikr is an act of worship within Islam, and its literal translation is "remembrance of God." Throughout the teachings of Islam, we are taught to remember God through His words, *dua*, or repeated phrases taught to us through the Qur'an or the *sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). Within Islam, there is a prescribed *zikr* for various experiences we go through in life, for we are taught to remember God in all circumstances, when we encounter happiness or joy, success or failure, difficulty or ease. For example, we are taught to say (from the Qur'an), "*inna lilahi wa inna ilayhi rajee'oon*" – which translates to "*Verily, to God we belong, and to Him we return*"[123] – during times of calamity or difficulty. Through *zikr*, God remains our center point through the varying landscapes of our human experience.

When we truly understand our design, we understand that our heart *needs* to remember God like our lungs need air. Every time we remember God, we turn the heart to face the *ruh*. Our soul is awakened and we can live from this higher place. Everything in the heavens and earth remembers God and praises Him. We have our *zikr* (remembrance) and form of praising God, and every creature and creation has theirs. God tells us, "*The seven heavens and the earth and everyone in them glorify Him. There is not a single thing that does not celebrate His praise, though you do not understand their praise: He is most forbearing, most forgiving*" (Qur'an, 17:44). God also says, "*Do you not see that all those who are in the heavens and earth praise Allah (God), as do the birds with wings outstretched? Each knows its (own way) of prayer and glorification: Allah (God) has full knowledge of what they do*" (Qur'an, 24:41).

123 Qur'an, 2:156.

I love watching birds as they fly,
because as they spread their wings,
they are praising the Divine.
They have their own form of *zikr*
And they remind me of mine.[124]

We are taught to remember God so that our soul is always reminded of its home. Whether this is through reading the Qur'an, asking for forgiveness (saying *istighfar*), glorifying God (saying *subhanAllah*), or expressing gratitude (saying *alhamdulilah*), the heart and soul become awakened and nourished so powerfully by the remembrance of God. But *zikr* does not just have a spiritual power. One of the greatest cognitive, emotional, and spiritual tools that God gave us is *zikr*. It has the power to help us redirect our thoughts, and subsequent emotions and behaviors. Therefore, *zikr* is a powerful psycho-spiritual practice.

In my research study, *zikr* was actually identified to be a great therapeutic tool for Muslims. One participant stated: "*Basically zikr, replacing negative thoughts with a phrase that connects them back to submission to Allah (God)... That is a hugely beneficial tool for cognitive restructuring ...*"[125]

In psychology, we know that negative thoughts need interception. And if we do not intercept or redirect a negative thought, we end up perseverating and ruminating on them, which means our thoughts become cyclical, repetitive, distressful, and harder to let go of. Thoughts, especially negative ones, have a great power to spiral into more negative thoughts, where we can essentially "make a mountain out of a molehill." In Cognitive Behavioral Psychology, we call this catastrophizing. Catastrophizing is a cognitive distortion or alteration, where our brain jumps to the worst possible scenario or negative thought, usually without any rational evidence to support it. This can be very common for people who struggle with anxiety, as the fear they feel about the future propels them to think of all the possible scenarios that can result in a situation. As you can imagine, as the negative thoughts increase, and catastrophizing starts to take place, difficult and intense emotions like fear or whatever emotion is associated with the thought will increase as well. Once emotions intensify, they become harder to control, and it becomes more likely that we will act and behave in reaction to those emotions. So the key is to build the muscle of directing a negative thought before it manifests into intensified negative emotions and subsequent negative behaviors. In fact, Imam Al-Ghazali highlights the importance of nipping a thought at its bud for this reason: its impact on our states and behaviors. He says: "*If the first inward thought is not*

124 Poem by the author.

125 Assar, M. (2017).

warded off, it will generate a desire, then the desire will generate a wish, and the wish will generate an intention, and the intention will generate the action, and the action will result in ruin and divine wrath. So evil must be cut off at its root, which is when it is simply a thought that crosses the mind, from which all the other things follow on."[126]

Zikr can be a powerful way to nip a thought as early as we recognize it. By remembering God, His control, His power, His Care, we direct our mind in a more fruitful and truthful direction. And as we direct our mind to God's truths and what He has taught us in the Qur'an and *sunnah*, the heart becomes awakened by those truths, and now can actually help the mind stay focused on what matters. In moments of stress, anxiety, fear, sadness, we have the opportunity to direct our mind and heart to God and engage in a greater trust and reliance on Him, which is the practice of *tawakul* (trust and reliance on God). *Zikr* has the power to stop a cognitive distortion arising within our minds. For example, let's say you are waiting to hear back about a job interview. Your mind starts to engage in thoughts about how the interview went or how they might respond to you. If you are not used to doing inner work, you won't have built the muscle of directing your mind in those moments, and instead your mind might take you to a thought so far from reality you might not have even understood how you got there. This is the power of the mind. It can continue forming new thoughts until we direct it to think about something else. So it's not that a person stops thinking, but that the quality of thoughts and their direction change. I say this because many people think that to improve their mental health or master the art of meditation, one has to "quiet" their minds. But this is simply not entirely accurate.. Our thoughts do not have a volume button or a "turn off" switch. And that is because our brain is always working, constantly fulfilling the purpose it was created to do, always collecting information and doing its job like a machine, to process and interpret that information and make connections between those pieces of information. So, while we may not have the power to turn off our mind or turn the volume down on our thoughts, what we do have the power to do is become better at choosing them and redirecting them, so they don't interfere with our heart's experience and ability to be present and nourished by what we encounter in life. As the quality and direction of our thoughts change, our mind's power over us is not as strong. Its place in our inner world is no longer as urgent or as great of a priority as our heart's. It no longer is taking us in a million different directions. Instead of our mind controlling us, we become in control of it, and perhaps then, that is why people say they "quiet" their minds: because they feel a greater settling, stillness, and peace when their mind is no

126 Al-Munajjid, M. S. (2010).

longer in the lead, and instead a servant of the heart. So, referring back to the previous example, if you are waiting to hear back from an interview, and you are doing the aligning work of living by the H.O.M.E. Method and you now understand the mind's role of being a great servant of the heart, you will be better at recognizing how a thought is not helpful and won't serve your heart and your spiritual, mental, and emotional health. So instead of letting your thoughts direct you, you direct your mind and heart to God. Perhaps, you engage in the *zikr* of *I put my trust in God,* or *God is sufficient for me.* Maybe you even start supplicating, another great form of *zikr*. You start asking God to guide you to what is best, to the outcome that is best for you. Right there, you have channeled your thoughts in the best of directions. The likelihood that those initial thoughts will spiral to become a hundred more negative thoughts becomes much lesser.

Through *zikr*, you prevent yourself from engaging in cognitive distortions, thoughts that do not align with the reality in front of you. But cognitive distortions can be harder to avoid for some, especially those who have been through trauma or struggle with low self-esteem or self-worth. It becomes imperative to seek therapy to do the work of healing and addressing distorted thinking patterns and beliefs that are harder to avoid. This doesn't mean that *zikr* won't help at all for these individuals. It will, but one's engagement with healing and learning the psychological tools that can help the health of their mind and heart, only empowers our ability to practice *zikr* and benefit from it. This is why I always say that the relationship between spiritual health and psychological health is a two-way, interconnected, and mutual relationship. Your work to grow spiritually empowers you psychologically, and your work to grow and heal psychologically empowers you spiritually.

Revive Your Connection to The Qur'an

The heart *needs* the Qur'an. The Qur'an holds great psycho-spiritual power for each of us. It has immense holistic healing benefits. And it speaks to the alignment of our inner facets – the heart, mind, and ego – and the subsequent alignment of our psycho-spiritual system with the rest of our being. The Qur'an was sent as a mercy and healing to mankind, but it is sadly often neglected in people's journey of healing and growing on a mental and emotional level.

"*And We sent down in the Qur'an such things that have healing and mercy for the believers.*" (Qur'an, 17:82)

In Arabic, the Qur'an means "recitation." The Qur'an was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) in the Arabic tongue through Angel Jibreel. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) was illiterate and did not have the ability to read, and therefore he could only recite the verses that were revealed to him from God. This itself was a great miracle, for how could someone who could not read or write, be able

to recite such perfect and powerful verses as the Qur'an? Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) could not have been the author or editor of the Qur'an. The Qur'an is the literal and eternal word of God. Today, the Qur'an has been translated into several different languages, but 1400 years later, it is still preserved in its original Arabic language and has not been changed or altered. This is another miracle of the Qur'an that reflects the promise of God to protect this final book that was sent down by Him to humanity.

> "*Indeed, it is We who sent down the Quran and indeed, We will be its guardian.*" (Qur'an, 15:9)

In the world of psychology, we know the power of words. Words have a tremendous impact on our psyche. They have the power to influence thoughts of growth or thoughts of stagnation and failure. They have the power to influence beautiful emotions or the worst of emotions. They have the power to open the heart or close the heart. They have the power to fuel growth or stunt it. Words also play a great role in how we learn. Through words, our brain receives new information. Through the study of neuropsychology, we can see that every time we learn new information, our brain actually forms new neurons and connections. A neuron is a cell in our brain that communicates through both electrical and chemical signals. There are billions of neurons in our brains, and they are responsible for sending information throughout our brain. Every time we learn or attain new information, the brain actually forms new neurons, strengthening the brain's connections, pathways, and plasticity. Essentially, our brain becomes more malleable (and transformable) and able to change and grow.

Words matter. The words we learn, hear, speak and say to ourselves or others have a huge impact on our entire well-being. Our body itself responds to how we speak to ourselves. If you put yourself down and call yourself the worst of names, you will feel it in your body. Destructive words will infect the very sacred environment within. Everything living is impacted by what is recited to it. Water itself, the very thing that gives shape and structure to every cell in our body, the very thing that makes up about 70% of our body, is impacted by words. In the work of trauma healing, we say that "the body keeps the score"[127] of trauma, meaning that its effect can be seen in the health of our physical being. Usually, we connect this to the nervous system and how it becomes dysregulated due to trauma's impact on it, but we often miss how trauma, especially verbal and psychological abuse, can impact the massive body of water within our beings.

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127 This saying was popularized by Bessel van der Kolk, M.D. See van der Kolk, B. (2015).

A Japanese researcher by the name of Dr. Masaru Emoto conducted a powerful research study on the impact of words on water molecules.[128] Through his research, he was demonstrating how words can actually alter the physical molecular structure of water. Through his research, he found that words contain a vibrational power, and can either form the most beautifully structured water crystals when they are positive words, or form the complete opposite when they are negative words. Dr. Emoto found that the bottles that were labeled with positive words and messages contained water that formed beautiful shaped water crystals that had the reflectiveness of diamonds (when frozen), and were balanced and symmetrical. He then found that the bottles that were labeled with negative, evil, and hateful words had the complete opposite effect on the water crystals, and its water formed distorted structures that lacked balance and symmetry. The pictures he took of these water crystals spoke for themselves.[129] What is even more fascinating is that Dr. Emoto tried the same experiment with the Qur'anic verses and the 99 names of God. He said: "*...we put the Arabic words on the water bottle and left it over twenty four hours. Then photographed it. It is true that each (of those) crystals (was) unique and beautiful.*"[130]

Dr. Emoto spent many years studying the impact of words on water and water's capacity to heal and express itself. He says in his book, *The Hidden Messages in Water*: "*I have studied water for many years. The realization that water has the ability to copy information has changed my life. After making this discovery in America, I brought it back with me to Japan, and have since used the information-copying function of water to help people recover their health. At that time, however, doctors would not even consider the possibility that water by itself had healing capabilities. I was and am fully convinced that water is able to memorize and transport information, but this suggestion has been met with complete rejection by the medical community.*"[131] But while the world is slow to accept the powerful healing impact of water, Muslims have always been connected to the healing power of water, especially a very specific source of water. Since the time of Prophet Ibrahim, millions of Muslims have benefited from the well of *Zamzam*, a miraculous water source in Saudi Arabia, that has, even up to the present day, provided a continuous source of the purest water and a means of healing for thousands of years. Consuming *Zamzam* is an integral part of the rituals of *umrah* and *hajj* (the minor and major pilgrimages). As Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) said, "*The best water on the face of the earth is Zamzam*

128 Emoto, M. (2005).

129 The Wellness Enterprise (2017).

130 Academy for Islamic Studies and Research (n.d.).

131 Emoto, M. (2005).

water. In it is food for nourishment and healing for illness."[132] Today, research confirms the healing properties of *Zamzam*, and that it contains a broad variety of therapeutic and medicinal properties such as antidepressant, antioxidant, and antitumor effects.[133] Dr. Emoto himself witnessed the miraculousness of *Zamzam* water and its unique qualities when he attempted to utilize *Zamzam* water in his experiments. Unlike other water he experimented with, he said, "*the quality/purity Zamzam water has, will not be found anywhere else in the water on this earth.*"[134] Ofcourse, many Muslims have attested to the purifying and healing impact of *Zamzam* water. Ibn Al-Qayyim himself has said: "*Myself and others tried seeking healing with Zamzam water and saw wondrous things. I sought healing with it from a number of illnesses, and I was healed by the permission of God.*"[135]

But in addition to our connection to the power of *Zamzam* water, Muslims are also deeply connected to the power of words being recited on water, specifically God's words, for in Islam we have the practice of *ruqyah*. *Ruqyah* is the healing method and practice of reciting Qur'anic verses on water and then drinking and performing *ghusl* (major ablution of purification) with the water that was recited on. This healing method has great spiritual, mental, and emotional benefits. That is because words (with God's words being the greatest words) contain vibrations and power that have a great impact on any living being. Even plants and their growth are impacted by words. In a recent study done on "Psychological and Physiological Effect in Plant Growth and Health by using Positive and Negative Words," it was found that the plants that received encouraging words grew beyond the plants that received negative and discouraging words.[136] In fact, the plant that was cursed and talked negatively to became stuck. It stopped growing and blooming. This is the power of words. This is how words can impact just a plant, so imagine then, how words can impact a human being.

As a psychologist, I know the great power of words on a person's inner world, especially the words we receive as children from those who are responsible for watering our growth and blooming. Through my own experience working with clients, I have seen how verbal abuse completely alters a person's ability to experience harmony within, and develop a strong and healthy sense of self. When one is not nurtured properly, and not watered by the right words, they

132 *Al-Mu'jam al-Kabīr,* 11011

133 Mahmoud, H. S. et al. (2020).

134 Elhadary, T. (2021).

135 *Zaad al-Ma'aad,* 4/319, 320.

136 Choube, D. & Sharma, S. (2021).

grow dehydrated, parched, depending so strongly on that which is outside of them to tell them who they are and to constantly validate their being. But I have also seen how children who grow up with loving words, who weren't berated or verbally abused and put down or called names, grow up to have a stronger sense of self. They have internalized the nurturing words of their parents, and their sense of self bears the fruits of those words. The relationship between verbal abuse and a person's psychological development is something that is clearly seen and confirmed through psychological research and practice. But if we look in the Qur'an, we can see that our Creator Himself already taught us the great power of words, when He says, "*Have you not considered how Allah (God) presents an example, (making) a good word like a good tree, whose root is firmly fixed and its branches (high) in the sky?*" (14:24).

In this verse, God is equating good words to a tree that is firmly grounded, and that grows so beautifully that its branches are high in the sky. The tree described in this verse can be compared to a person who develops a healthy and strong sense of self. They are grounded. They know who they are. They become rooted in a great foundation. And they are able to grow beautifully and branch out into the world greatly elevated spiritually, emotionally, and mentally. This is the power of *good* words. This verse teaches us the importance of speaking well to others, but it also should point us to the importance of speaking well to ourselves, and to being conscious of the words we receive from our world – the words we hear and read.

The words we receive from the world impact those connections our brain makes, as well as the health of our hearts. What is said and recited to us matters. But if words can harm, words can also heal. Words can help our mind form new pathways and unlearn old thoughts and beliefs. Words can open hearts and can break through the strongest walls built around them. Words can water souls, allowing our entire being to bloom and grow upright. And if a parent's words – that are positive, nurturing, and true – can have such a great impact on our psyche, then imagine how powerful, positive, and nurturing it is to receive the words of not our parents, but the Creator of us and our parents? If the beautiful words of humans can help a plant grow upright and bloom beautifully, imagine how powerfully God's words, the Qur'an, can help you grow and bloom. If positive words can send the most powerful vibrations to transform the normal structure of a water molecule into the most beautiful, balanced, and symmetrical of shapes, then imagine what the living, eternal, most miraculous words of God can do to our entire being and every water molecule that makes up 70% of our body, but also everything we interact with, for as God tells us in the Qur'an, "*...and We created from water every living thing. Would they still not believe?*" (21:30) Without water, there is no life. So, if the vibrations of good words from a human being can change the

very structure of water itself, then *life* itself is also transformed. Imagine then how the vibrations from the recitation of the Qur'an can beautifully alter your entire life. The Qur'an has the power to change, shape, and mold our minds, hearts, and entire psycho-spiritual system, beautifully.

Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) would ask God "*...to make the Qur'an the spring of my heart, and the light of my chest, the banisher of my sadness, and the reliever of my distress.*"[137] In this prophetic *dua*, the Qur'an is associated with the power of watering our hearts, becoming a light of our inner being, removing sadness, and relieving distress. In fact, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) recommended that we say this when we are experiencing distress or sorrow. In this *dua*, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) is referring to the Qur'an as the spring of our hearts. But, how is the Qur'an like a spring? Let's first understand what a spring is. A spring is a great resource of streaming water. It provides us with constant and flowing water, and as a result the earth and its creatures can continuously benefit from it. The Qur'an is like this spring. For as long as we remain connected to it, it will continuously replenish and awaken the heart as powerfully as the spring replenishes and awakens a dead earth. It offers our inner being a continuous flow of resources designed to bring the heart back to life, and break through the hardest of its barriers created by the *nafs*. Water, as beautiful and calming as it is, is a great and powerful force that can break through the strongest of barriers, depending on its pressure. Water can erode land and break the hardest of rocks. In fact, it is not a coincidence that God compares our hearts to rocks in the Qur'an: "*Even then your hearts became hardened like a rock or even harder, for some rocks gush rivers; others split, spilling water; while others are humbled in awe of Allah (God). And Allah is never unaware of what you do*" (2:74). Our hearts can become hardened like rocks, but the Qur'an has the power to flow water through the hardest of hearts, softening it, eroding its hardness away. The Qur'an has the power to bring great comfort to our inner world in a way that no human words can do. Because it is God, our Creator, the Most Loving, the Most Merciful, and the Source of all water, life, and nourishment *Who* is speaking. Through a consistent connection with His words, we have the power to be replenished mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, which is necessary for the transformation, growth, and healing we need.

Through the Qur'an, the heart can become so powerfully nourished and equipped to take back its leadership within our being. But this needs consistent effort. We cannot neglect God's words, for we then become deprived of the greatest of vibrations our soul needs to feel alive. We need to prioritize receiving a daily dose of the Qur'an just as we see the importance of working out daily

137 *Hisn al-Muslim*, 120.

or eating healthy daily or taking our vitamins daily. We need to develop a direct and intimate relationship with the Qur'an, where God's words become our greatest need and priority above the words of the world. This is a truth I powerfully learned in my life when I once asked one of my teachers if He knew of any books that would help connect me to the *akhira* (hereafter). He responded by saying, "*The Qur'an.*" I then said, "*I meant scholarly books written about the topic.*" He repeated, "*The Qur'an.*" And then he said something to me that I felt answered so many more questions than the one I was asking. He said, "*Stop trying to take people with you. Go to God alone.*" I know logically many questions might come up after an answer like that. But I didn't need to ask any further questions. It was one of those moments where my heart understood the poignant truth within his statement, and as a result I became at peace with the answer. My heart understood the intended message. He wasn't telling me not to study or learn from other scholars, for he is a great scholar himself who studied under giants who walked this earth, but what he was addressing was our heart's dependence sometimes on others to understand God, or to grow spiritually. He was addressing our need to go to the creation before the Creator: our tendency to constantly listen to a YouTube lecture, or get fast knowledge, but rarely pick up the Qur'an and consistently develop a direct relationship with God's words and access the unfiltered meanings that God has for each reader. He is a teacher who was always pointing us to God and not him or any scholar. He was pointing me in the direction of having a direct connection with the Qur'an before always going to others' interpretation of it.

The Qur'an will always speak to every individual heart. And while it is important to study and read the works of many who have spent their lives interpreting this great Book, we cannot depend on that alone. Because we will miss out on the many messages, meanings, and blessings that God has for our individual heart when we open the Qur'an, ready for God to speak directly to our own heart. We need to take our heart to the Qur'an, even when we don't feel like it, for the heart *needs* it. It is one of the greatest and loftiest prescriptions God has provided for the heart to heal, to be nourished, to be awakened, to come alive, and to be whole. It is what allows the heart to elevate above the desires of the *nafs* and align itself with our higher self. A heart that is filled with the Qur'an is a heart that will be easily disturbed if we try to fill it with anything that is not aligned with God's words. A heart that is quenched by the Qur'an will not long to drink from any other words that do not serve our ability to *live* by God's words. A heart that is decorated with the Qur'an decorates our mind, thoughts, beliefs, interpretations, values, emotions, reactions, character, and behavior. A heart transformed by the Qur'an can lead our entire psycho-spiritual system to be transformed and aligned.

"Verily, this Quran is a rope. One end is in the hand of Allah (God) and the other end is in your hands. Hold fast to it, for you will never be led astray or ruined ever again."[138] — Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ)

The Qur'an, being like an infinite and continuous source of water, has the capacity to quench our thirst and provide us with meaning and beauty is endless, because it comes from a Source whose knowledge and beauty is endless. It is the means in which God speaks to our hearts through every phase in our life. You can read a verse today that will settle into your heart in a completely different way than when you read it yesterday, a week ago, or a year ago. This is the beauty and mercy of God. He knows each one of us more than we will ever know ourselves. He comes between a man and his heart.[139] He is closer to us than our own jugular vein[140] that keeps our heart pumping blood and our body alive. He knows what we want and need. And when we take the tiniest steps towards Him, He will take leaps towards us. He will tailor the message to our needs and allow our heart to receive exactly what it needs to be nourished.

The sad part, though, is that we get so consumed and distracted by this world, our own selves, our problems, our experiences, our wants, that we do not make a consistent effort to be present with God and what He is trying to tell us. We prioritize all other worldly prescriptions more than we prioritize the great prescription of daily Qur'an. And oftentimes, we expect from God to show us signs and to answer our *duas* for us to feel like He is acknowledging us or speaking to us. But we forget that the Qur'an *is* a powerful way in which God speaks to each of us individually and our unique path in this world. Through the Qur'an, God gives us powerful signs we wouldn't receive anywhere else. But only when we lead from our heart, and go to the Qur'an with our hearts (not our mind or *nafs*), can the heart receive such messages and signs. If we go to the Qur'an with our minds in the lead, we will most likely disengage and lose focus when we are reading verses we are familiar with, because the mind recognizes that it has already absorbed these verses before. When we go to the Qur'an with the *nafs* as the lead, we will become bored easily and struggle to be present with God's words. But when we go to the Qur'an with our hearts in the lead, we receive something new every time. It doesn't matter how many times we read a chapter, the heart walks away with greater nourishment and meaning. What was already beautiful becomes even more beautiful, and we see a connection between what we are reading and our current life.

So, when you open the Qur'an, train yourself to go with your heart as the lead, by prioritizing the nourishment of your heart above all else. And you

138 *Sahīh Ibn Hibbān,* 122.

139 Qur'an, 8:24

140 Qur'an, 50:16

can do that by remembering how much your heart *needs* God's words, and by being present with God talking to *you* and only *you* in that moment. It is an intimate experience. He sees you. He is speaking to you. He created this book so that you can hear His messages for *you*. And, He is waiting for you to open your heart to receive all that He wishes to give you.

Increase in Following The *Sunnah* Each Day

The heart *needs* the *sunnah*. There is great psycho-spiritual benefit in following the example of the Prophet (ﷺ). The *sunnah* is the Arabic term we use to refer to the prophetic way of life or tradition of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). Islam is a religion that is rooted in the belief that God is one, but also the belief that God sent messengers and prophets from the beginning of mankind (i.e., Adam, Ibrahim, Musa, Ya'kub, Issa) with the same message of monotheism, and Muhammad (ﷺ) is the final and last prophet and messenger to humanity. Islam teaches us to emulate the model of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) (and all prophets) as a way to draw closer to God, but also as a way to improve our character and behaviors. As Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) has said in a well-known *hadith*, "*I have only been sent to perfect good moral character.*"[141]

God could have just sent us the Qur'an, His living and eternal word, to give us guidance, but He didn't. Because God, as our Creator, knows our psychology and knows *how* we learn. We as human beings do not learn and transform our behaviors through *just* knowledge. We need to see an example of that knowledge manifesting itself into real behavior in front of us. This truth is evident in the psychology of learning, which teaches that we learn more through what is modeled rather than what is just said to them. I saw this truth very clearly when working with parents and children over the years. Parents will say, when disappointed in their child's actions, "*But I always told him or her to do the opposite.*" When explored further, parents will often admit that even though they told their child to do something, they themselves were demonstrating another truth through their behaviors and living example. What they were saying to the child was not in line with what they were actually doing. And the child was simply emulating their behavior, not their words.

God sent the Prophet (ﷺ) to provide us a living and human example of how the teachings of the Qur'an show up in our speech, character, and behavior. In fact, when asked about the Prophet's (ﷺ) character, Aisha (رضي الله عنها), his wife, responded by saying, "*Verily, the character of the Prophet of Allah (God) was the Qur'an.*"[142] And it is through following his blessed example can *our* character

141 *Sahīh al-Albani,* Book 14, Hadith 273.

142 *Sahīh Muslim,* 746.

and unhelpful behaviors be transformed. This was a truth that was highlighted in my doctoral research study, when one participant, in talking about the utilization of the "*sunnah*" in therapy, said: "*...the reason that that's there, is to give us a path of emulation for correcting all of the maladaptive behaviors and patterns that we have acquired through coming into this world.*"[143]

We need human examples of greatness. We need to see evidence that what is taught can actually be practiced. This is how belief in a truth is solidified. It makes sense then why our testimonial of faith is not just a testification to God being our Lord, but also a testification to Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) being the messenger of God. Our belief in God is not complete if we negate our belief in Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), the most blessed of mankind who God sent to show us *how* to live by what He taught us in the Qur'an. Therefore, in the life of a Muslim, we do not just follow the Qur'an, but also the *sunnah* of the Prophet (ﷺ). Through the details of his life, we see how he led and lived in every dimension and area of life: as a husband, father, community leader, *imam*, friend, and political leader. And through His great hardships and trials in life, we see what resilience looks like. We see how one should respond to grief, sadness, distress, and even joy. Through the *sunnah*, we are essentially equipped with a psychological and spiritual tool kit of how to cope with life and its varying spiritual, emotional, relational, and personal struggles.

Increase in Charity & Being of Service to Others

The *ruh* can only be at peace in the presence of actions that are in line with its *fitrah*: actions that are pure, good, and sacred. To provide the *ruh* with such peace, our heart needs to guide our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors towards engaging in such actions. One of these essential actions is charity or giving, which essentially is the practice of serving God's creation. God tells us in the Qur'an, "*... those of you who believe and give will have a great reward*" (Qur'an, 57:7).

Charity (or *sadaqah*) can be practiced in many different forms. There is the charity of time, where we serve God's creation by giving of our time to listen to others or giving of our time to help a person with a task. Giving money is another form of charity, where we give from our wealth to help those less fortunate. Another form of charity is giving from our resources to help, support and empower others. In Islam, any action that brings benefit, supports others, provides justice between people, or removes harm from the world is a charity, for it promotes the presence of good and purity in the world. This is reflected in the following *hadith*, where Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) said: "*On every person's joints or small bones (i.e. fingers and toes), there is sadaqah (charity) every day*

143 Assar, M. (2017).

*the sun rises. **Bringing about justice between two** is an act of charity. **Helping a man get on his mount**, lifting him onto it or helping him put his belongings onto it, is a charitable act. **A good word** is a charitable act. **Every step you take toward the prayer** is a charitable act. And **removing a harmful thing** from the path is a charitable act."*[144] This *hadith* provides us with many examples of what giving in charity looks like. Amongst these examples, is the practice of speaking good (and true) words. There is an emphasis in Islam on monitoring what the tongue says, for what we say not only impacts our hearts but also the hearts of others. Our ability to speak is a gift from God and the means in which He allows us to communicate our internal word to others as well as positively impact the world around us. Speaking kindly, speaking truthfully, speaking when it only benefits ourselves and others, are all ways in which our speech can promote the growth and nourishment of our hearts.

Revive *Tawakul* in Your Life

The heart *needs tawakul. Tawakul* is the practice of placing our full reliance on God and trusting Him, who He is, His words, His promises, and His plan for us over our own plan for ourselves. The heart finds rest when we trust God, and place our full reliance on Him, and it only finds turbulence when we don't. And that is because, when we neglect to fully rely on God, we end up burdening ourselves more than we can bear. Many of us carry too much in this world. We depend on ourselves in very unhealthy ways. And many people unfortunately depend on their resources more than they depend on God's resources. But even our resources are from God. When all we depend on is ourselves, we do not see the Source of all that we have and need to thrive. This creates great mental, emotional, and spiritual distress, for we were never designed to place full reliance on ourselves and abilities. Today, many are burdened psychologically due to the absence of *tawakul* in their lives. This is greatly due to a lack of knowledge about who God is, for knowledge precedes trust in any relationship, even in our relationship with God. We cannot trust who we do not know. This is why a connection with the Qur'an is so essential, for God is constantly telling us *who* He is. He tells us who He is so that we understand the greatness and reliability of Who we are trusting. Only when we understand *Al-Wakeel* can we practice *tawakul.* As God tells us in the Qur'an: "*And to Allah (God) belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth. And sufficient is Allah (God) as Disposer of affairs (Wakeel)*" (4:132).

Many times people will ask, "why does God say in the Qur'an that He doesn't burden a soul more than it can bear[145] when this test I am going

144 *Sahīh al-Bukhari*, 2989; *Sahīh Muslim*, 1009.

145 Qur'an, 2:286

through feels unbearable?" And to that I often say that we neglect to assess how we have carried more than God asked us to carry, and added to our test what never came with the test. We also were never designed to go through our struggles alone and to rely only on ourselves to carry and navigate our pain and difficulties. God wants you to put forth your greatest effort, but as you do so and even after you have done everything you can, He wants you to rely on Him. He never asked you to go through life alone. He asked you to hold on to His rope.[146] If you do, He will never let you fall or let your efforts be in vain. Above all, He won't leave you alone to depend on your inner faculties in a way that burdens them.

Through everything we go through, we *need* to rely on Him. Through all our experiences, we need to turn our heart to God and place in His hands what He never asked us to carry. God tells us in the Qur'an (20:132), *"Enjoin your people to pray, and pray steadfastly yourself. We are not asking you for provision; We provide for you."* In this verse, God is reminding us to prioritize and focus on what He has placed in our responsibility – to worship Him and remain steadfast – and to not take on a responsibility that is only for God – such as our provision and the outcome of our work and efforts. This verse is so important, because many times, we make the mistake of fixating on what is *not* in our power and responsibility, while neglecting the very things that are within our power and responsibility. This increases our anxiety, for nothing triggers anxiety more than powerlessness, helplessness, and not feeling a sense of control over anything. And this is why *tawakul* is so important, for it is a means for you to take back your power from things you can't control (i.e, outcomes, people, the future) and place it in the hands of the One who has full control. By attaching our hearts to God, we are linking ourselves to the One who has full power, and through that link we feel stronger. We feel secure to walk this world knowing the King of kings has our back. And it is that attachment to God's power and control that frees us up to actually focus on what is in our control and detach from what isn't. Tawakul declutters the mind and heart and clarifies our vision to see what we have the power to do and change in the present reality God has placed us in. And it is only when we are connected to the power we have to make a difference, does our inner world become more peaceful.

We need *tawakul* to powerfully face the uncertainties of life, which are constant. But, naturally, due to this human element of the *nafs* that is within all of us, we are inclined to chase certainty and make immediate sense of everything we encounter in life, but that inclination will be stronger and harder to manage and direct, if we are just letting our *nafs* take the lead by prioritizing its instant gratification, while neglecting to activate and nourish our hearts.

146 Qur'an, 3:103.

To activate our hearts, we must do the work of connecting to its Creator and practicing full reliance on Him. We must surrender to His knowledge over ours. We must humble our minds in *sujood*, and be okay with not having all the answers. This requires struggle, because the *nafs* is not okay with not knowing, because it is uncomfortable. So if the *nafs* is the lead, it will bully and put pressure on our minds to figure everything out, and if we do arrive at any knowledge, the *nafs* will take the credit instantaneously, deluded to think it's the source of that knowledge, further inflating our egos.

When we practice *tawakul*, the heart is nourished and empowered to lead. And that is why *tawakul* and the leadership of the heart are strongly linked. For how can the heart *not* be a beautiful leader within our being while it is practicing full reliance on God? Who wouldn't follow a leader who has that great of a trust in God, who knows that God is watching over us, planning for us, protecting us, and guiding us? This is what made Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) a great leader: his unshakeable reliance on God, even in the face of the toughest of situations. When he (ﷺ) was escaping persecution and completing his *hijrah* (migration) to Madinah, he took all the measures necessary, but after doing so, he exemplified the greatest *tawakul*. A great example of this is when he (ﷺ) and Abu Bakr (رضي الله عنه) were hiding in a cave along the way, and their enemies approached. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and Abu Bakr could clearly see their enemies looking into the cave, but their enemies could not see them. When Abu Bakr started to worry, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) reminded him to trust God in the most beautiful of ways, by telling him, *"O Abu Bakr, what do you think of two with whom Allah is the third?"*[147] The Prophet's (ﷺ) heart was so nourished and decorated by the practice of *tawakul*, that his heart led the way. His beautiful heart led him through that *hijrah* and it beautifully led the heart of Abu Bakr as well. Abu Bakr was in the presence of a great leader that exemplified *tawakul* and had no choice but to trust and follow. The same is true when a husband or father has great *tawakul*. His wife and children can more easily trust him as a leader of their home. When the mother has *tawakul*, her family can do the same.

When the heart is the lead of our inner being, it's at peace knowing that its Creator is in full control, has all knowledge, and is the Creator of all truth we are seeking. While the *nafs* is obsessed with knowing the "*hows*," the heart when in the lead learns to leave the "*hows*" to God and focuses on "*what*" it can do in the present. The very question of asking *"how something will happen or come into our lives?"* is very future oriented, while the question of *"what we can do?"* is very present oriented. And because the *nafs* is very future oriented, we will

147 *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 3096.

find ourselves always having a very unhealthy need to know "how" things will play out, if we are leading from the nafs. The heart, on the other hand, is very present-oriented and thrives when we focus on our power and usefulness in the present. It knows God will take care of "how" the outcomes of our efforts manifest themselves, just as God took care of how Prophet Ibrahim's efforts manifested themselves. After Prophet Ibrahim finished structuring the *kaaba*, God commanded him to call the people to *hajj*. Prophet Ibrahim asked God, "how will my voice reach the people?" and to that, God told him that his duty is only to call the people to hajj and God will take care of how it reaches the people. Ibrahim then left the "how" to God and focused on "what" He can do, which is to obey God's command and call the people to hajj. And God most beautifully and powerfully took care of the "how," for until today, every single year, millions of people answer the call to hajj that was first made by Ibrahim. This is the power of *tawakul*. It directs you to stay present by asking "what can I do today?" rather than "how will things play out tomorrow?" Tawakul is the practice of being in the here and now and activating the heart's connection to *only* what God has revealed for it to know in the present.

Through *tawakul*, the heart is activated and becomes aligned with the *ruh*. As a result, the *nafs* becomes weaker and no longer able to lead, and subsequently, the mind is freed from being its servant. Instead, the mind begins to serve the heart which has taken back its rightful position as the leader of our inner world. The mind begins to think, process, and reflect in a way that serves our hearts. It interacts with knowledge in a more effective manner. As we connect to His truth, His book, and what He and His messenger have taught us, He begins to lift the veils between our hearts and truth. The heart begins to gain the capacity to see what the eyes cannot see and comprehend what the mind is unable to. And when God *does* unveil us to witness the knowledge or answers we need to know in the time we need to know it, the heart when in the lead, unlike the *nafs*, guides us to still remember and submit to God, asking Him to make that knowledge beneficial, and attributing all beneficial knowledge to Him. Through *tawakul* and leading from the heart, we begin to understand that our main concern and goal in life should be to take care and guard this heart within our chests, this most precious gift within our being, so that one day we can bring it back to Him *saleem* – whole and sound.

We need *tawakul* on this journey back to God, and He has given us every reason to trust Him, but our *nafs* and all its worries, fears, and drives for instant gratification, create a great psychological barrier to us trusting God. When the *nafs* is our lead, we do not get to experience the sweetness, power, and inner peace and alignment that comes from trusting God. We were born to trust God like a child trusts its mother. In fact, true *tawakul* is the experience of learning

to trust God as beautifully as a child trusts their mother to look over them as they play and explore their world. The mother-child relationship teaches us so much about *tawakul*, about how much freer we can become when our trust in God becomes stronger. Imam Al-Ghazali highlights this beautifully when he says: "*One of the stages of tawakul is the state of one who comports himself with God as a child with his mother: he knows no one other than her, he takes refuge in no one other than her, and relies only on her. When he sees her, he hangs onto the hem of her skirt in every situation and never lets her go. If misfortune strikes him in her absence, the first thing to fall from his lips is 'mother', just as the first desire to stir in his heart is for his mother, for she is his refuge. For he is already confident in her security and her sufficiency and her compassion - a confidence not without some keen sense of discrimination connected with it. Whoever gives his attention to God reflects upon Him and relies on Him, sets his heart on Him as the child sets his heart on his mother, is truly one who trusts in Divine Providence, as the child inclines trustingly to his mother.*"[148] He also says: "*To completely trust in God is to be like a child who knows deeply that even if he does not call for the mother, the mother is totally aware of his condition and is looking after him.*"

When we practice *tawakul*, we are aligning ourselves with our *fitrah* and the beautiful truthful state that can be found in a child or even in nature itself. It is through the natural world that we can see *tawakul* exemplified all around us, especially through the animals. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) has said: "*If you were to rely upon Allah (God) with the reliance He is due, you would be given provision like the birds: They go out hungry in the morning and come back with full bellies in the evening.*"[149] The birds teach us *tawakul* so beautifully, and the sight of them always reminds my heart of this truth: *If God takes care of a bird in such a way, how can He not take care of me?*

These birds we watch and see
As they without a care, fly free
Are sustained and provided for
Every single day they soar
This was taught by none other than He
The Creator of the birds, you, and me
A sign from Him, Most Gracious, Most High
That all is cared for on earth and in the sky
And maybe if we trusted and paid heed
Our souls, like the birds, can also roam freed[150]

148 Al-Ghazali, A. (2001).

149 *Sunan Ibn Majah,* 4164.

150 Poem by the author.

Key Practice Tips

1. Identify one form of *zikr* that you will incorporate in your life daily. Take some time to research the benefits of that *zikr* to awaken and increase your heart's connection to it, for we are more likely to continue doing something when we are connected to its meaning, reward, and power it holds for us in this world and the next. And then, establish a minimum count that is easy and doable (i.e., 50x *istighfar*) and that you will commit to doing each day. You can of course increase that number as you go along, but start with a number that is realistic.

2. Make an intentional plan for how you will incorporate the Qur'an in your daily life. Choose the *surah* you will start with, establish a minimum amount of verses that you will commit to completing even in your hardest days.

3. Identify one *sunnah* practice you will revive in your life, something that is small and you can do consistently.

"Take up good deeds only as much as you are able, for the best deeds are those done regularly even if they are few."[151]
— Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ)

151 *Sunan Ibn Majah,* 4240.

13

Living By H.O.M.E.
Build the Psycho-Spiritual Muscle of Presence Through Mindfulness & Heartfulness

Presence is a key practice of the H.O.M.E. Method, for it is the very practice that facilitates the subsequent alignment of our heart, mind, and ego. But just like our physical muscles, the muscle of presence cannot be strengthened if we do not use it and activate it consistently. Without prioritizing the psycho-spiritual muscle of presence, we cannot begin to align, awaken, center ourselves, practice *tazkiyah*, put the *nafs* in its place, declutter our minds, feel lighter, practice *tawakul*, or cultivate a beautiful home within.

In the absence of presence, there is an absence of nourishment, and without nourishment, transformation and growth on any level cannot exist, and we end up living our lives feeling unfueled, unmotivated, and even at times empty inside. This can be a very painful experience, one where we walk our path feeling disconnected, on cruise control, and just going through the motions, while our heart is left to wither and become constricted and unable to experience joy and a fulfilling connection with anyone or anything we do. These are just some of the consequences we endure when we have not developed the muscle of presence.

Throughout the Qur'an and *sunnah*, the teaching of presence is apparent, alive, and a key building block of all practices. In Islam, there is deep emphasis on being present with God, oneself, and others. Through the prescriptions and teachings of Islam – such as *taqwa* (God-consciousness), *muraqabah* (sacred and holistic watchfulness), *shukr* (gratitude), *niyyah* (intentions), prayer, fasting – presence is empowered within the lives of Muslims. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) himself lived and exemplified a life of presence through great mindfulness and heartfulness that can be seen in how he spoke, how he greeted people, and how he honored his relationship with God, with himself, and with his family and community.

In today's world, many people struggle with being present. Distractions are abundant. Information we don't know what to do with takes space in our brain as we mindlessly scroll through our social media news feeds each day. We are constantly inundated with stimulus and noise that are increasingly more

difficult to detach from. As a result, many of us are feeling scattered, confused, and not grounded, productive, or at peace.

Therefore, we *need* presence. It is the antidote to a life of emptiness, malnourishment, and inner clutter. Presence is what turns the heart's lens away from all the noise we can't control or change, and instead turns it towards all that God has put right in front of us and given us the capacity to change. In any situation, we have the power to be present, to focus on the current reality, the potential of now, and the good we are doing or have the opportunity to do. This is what Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us, when he said that even if the day of judgment itself is upon us and we are planting a tree, to still plant it.[152] And we can agree that there is nothing as chaotic, distracting, or attention grabbing as the day of judgment, but even then, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) is teaching us that presence and the good we can do in the here and now *always* matters.

Gift Yourself With Presence

Presence *is* a present. It is the most aligning, awakening, and nourishing gift we can offer ourselves, and also others. From my years of providing therapy to clients, I have witnessed that there is nothing that promotes our spiritual, mental, and emotional well-being like presence.

Presence is the foundation of all the other psycho-spiritual practices and muscles defined in the H.O.M.E. Method, for it is the key ingredient and pre-requisite to giving our heart back its rightful position of leader within our being. It is what activates the heart to realize the power it has to connect, think, feel, and become nourished by its experiences. Without presence, we cannot practice *tazkiyah* (or purify our hearts), build the psycho-spiritual muscle of gratitude, be intentional, identify our beliefs, values, and needs, or beautifully direct our thoughts and emotions. Presence is what allows us to experience a fulfilling and nourishing relationship with ourselves, God, others, our acts of worship, and our experiences. It is what allows us to rise above the immediate urgency of our *nafs*'s needs, and recognize the needs of our higher self. It is what allows us to better navigate our minds, as presence helps us create a filter that keeps out useless clutter, and better channel unhelpful thoughts that do not serve our growth. Presence is what helps us to stop carrying what God never asked us to carry, and control what God never placed in our control, as we zoom in our focus on what is true and real in the *here and now* and what God has given us the capacity to handle *today*, not yesterday or tomorrow.

Presence is the practice of being connected to the truth of *now*, to the reality that exists right in front of us, and this is so important for our spiritual, mental,

152 *Musnad Ahmad*, 12902 (Sahīh Al-Arna'ut).

and emotional alignment and growth. But with the comfort driven and over-stimulated world we live in — with the rapid advancement of technology, social media, and fast entertainment — so many people struggle to be in the moment. More than ever, many people are highly attached to escaping the moment of *now* to live in a moment that has not yet existed or stay in a moment that has already passed. This applies to our over-attachment to recording every moment we are experiencing. We live in a world where we want to record everything, and in doing so, we deprive ourselves from being fully present. In those moments, we are disconnected from a great truth and that is: **a present heart is the best recorder in this life**. If we allow it to be present, it will capture what no phone or camera can. And while it is beautiful and normal to capture memories, balance is important. Our over-attachment to recording every single moment is an attachment to the future, a time when we will want to watch or replay the moment we are living, instead of actually just *living* it.

The *nafs* of course plays a key role in all the ways we try to escape the moment of *now*, because the *nafs* is constantly looking for its next fix of dopamine, comfort, or feeling good, and if left untamed and free to lead, it will influence you to always escape the present when faced with the slightest agitation. It is not a coincidence that depression and anxiety rates are alarmingly high in our world today, especially in the West. Infact, in my experience working with clients who struggle with anxiety and depression, I found that they have something in common, and that is the present is viewed with dread. For a person who struggles with anxiety, the present can be a place of dread because it may not offer them the certainty they need to be immediately soothed. It may lack information they need to perceive the *here and now* as secure and safe. A person will attempt to escape the present they perceive as unsafe by constantly worrying about the future and thinking of all the possible scenarios that can exist in the next moment. Ironically, while no one likes to worry, worrying and overthinking about all the possible future scenarios is actually the *nafs's* attempt to soothe. The present can be very agitating to someone who is experiencing anxiety, and worrying provides a person with the illusion that they are going to arrive at certainty and what will soothe the fear underlying their anxiety. And it can be very hard to break the cycle of worrying, especially if the *nafs* is what we feed the most within us and what we allow to be the lead. *Shaytan*, of course, also plays a role in keeping our minds in the loop of worry. *Shaytan* does not want us to be in the moment. He does not want us to maximize what God gave us today. He does not want us to see what is actually certain in our present: the truths and promises God already made available to us. Instead he wants us fixated on the information that God did *not* yet give us access to. He wants us chasing the illusion of what the future brings, so that we do not actually live in the only moment that is real and can offer us peace and joy.

"*Happiness is right in front of you.*" — Hafez[153]

The experience of anxiousness is like standing in a room where you are fixated on the closed windows and all the "what ifs" and scenarios that could be behind them, while there is an open *vast* door right in front of you connecting you to the reality of what *is*. The closed windows are the *constant* uncertainties of our life, while the open and greater door is the present: another *constant* in our life, but one we often ignore. For as long as we are alive, the here and now – this present moment – is a *constant* that is connecting us to all that is certain, and all that is real around us. This great and vast door is always available to you, but you have to decide to stop spending your time and energy fixating on the closed windows and guessing what's behind them, and begin intentionally building the muscle of walking through the door God has opened right in front of you each day. The greatest way to reduce anxiety is to direct your heart and attention to the only thing that is certain: the reality, truth, and moment that God created right in front of you in the here and now.

The experience of depression also includes the experience of viewing the present with dread. Depression is often associated with a lack of hope for what the future holds and, therefore, a person may present a tendency to excessively attach to moments that brought them joy or pain in the past, to ruminate about what they believe *should* have happened in the past but didn't, to think that the *best* of their life has already passed and won't happen again, or to attach to a very rigid idea of happiness that does not yet exist. In fact, existential psychology teaches us that depression lies in the gap between where we actually *are* and where we think we *should* be. When a person is in this gap, they are disconnected from their present while attaching themselves to a past situation where they were happy or a future situation where they think they will be happy. They have not only made "*happiness*" a destination, but they made it conditional: "*If I get that job, I will be happy.*" "*If I have children, I will be happy.*" "*If I get married, I will be happy.*" "*If my career launches, I will be happy.*"

When we are too busy thinking our happiness lies in a time that has not yet come, we end up ignoring what lies right in front of us, because in our minds, our happiness exists in a different place. So we get stuck in this gap: the gap between where we actually are, our present, and where we think we should be, our future. In this gap, there is much struggle and much pain. Happiness has become a destination in the future, and we struggle to constantly chase it, never really arriving. But when our minds and hearts are focused on the present, we stop trying to take ownership of a time and place we have not arrived at, and we start to notice the potential and beauty that lies right where we are.

153 Petras, K. & Petras, R. (2016).

We do not become stuck in this "gap" because we are too busy maximizing what is already in front of us and attaching to the reality of what exists rather than to the illusion of what could be or *should* be. When we can practice this, there is something much more valuable than happiness to attain, and that is peace and liberation.

Detachment is achieved
when our heart learns
to let go of that
which we try to own.

Inner Freedom is achieved
when our heart recognizes
that we never owned
anything in the first place.[154]

The past has already passed. The future is not yet a reality. The present is the only true reality we can interact with. This is why I say that the present is the most sacred space, for it is the only space we can connect to our ourselves — our blessings, strengths, challenges, truths, and potential — but it is also the only space we can truly connect to others and most importantly God and all that He has to offer us. And it is the *only* space we actually have the opportunity to act, change something, become one step closer to our goals, and make a true difference in our lives and the lives of others.

In order for us to truly feel more peace, less anxiety, feel more grounded, and – most importantly – more connected to God, we have to cultivate a heart that is present, that values what is right in front of it. To do this, the H.O.M.E. Method teaches both mindfulness and heartfulness, which requires that we engage with both the mind and heart to build the muscle of presence. The more we build the muscle of presence daily, the more our present will come to life, and we will feel more connected and nourished by the gift that is *now*.

From Mindfulness to Heartfulness: A Present Mind is a Present Heart

In our world today, presence is often talked about with the focus on the mind and thoughts, and rarely ever discussed in relation to the heart and soul. The H.O.M.E. Method teaches that presence is not just the practice of mindfulness, but also heartfulness. Presence forms in the mind, but sets in the heart. The heart needs the mind to be a dutiful servant for it to be present, connected, and nourished by its experiences. Today, many people struggle

154 Poem by the author.

with presence, because they do not include the heart in the practice. But the centering, awakening, and connection we derive from presence is an experience of none other than the heart. We only can feel nourished if the heart is actively engaged with what we are experiencing, not just the mind.

I learned this truth through my own experiences. Through trial and error, I learned that presence is only nourishing and awakening when the heart is activated, not just the mind. I remember being on vacation once during a time in my life where I didn't feel too nourished, aligned, and present. I remember standing in front of the most beautiful and breathtaking view and feeling *nothing*. My mind could recognize that this was a beautiful view, but my heart was not connected to it. It was like it was just there, taking up space within me, but not engaging with the world outside of me. I couldn't feel its energy and awakening to where I was. As a result, I walked away from that view with the same state I walked in. This experience taught me so much about the powerful role of the heart: that while our environment can be a contributing factor to our inner nourishment, joy, and awakening, the heart being alive, present, and connected is what matters the most. I also experienced the opposite, and this is what helped me understand the difference between presence of the mind, and presence of both the mind and heart. I have had experiences where I wasn't anywhere special – and not in front of any view – but my heart was so alive, present, and connected to what I was experiencing, that I walked away so full and nourished. And of course, I have had experiences where I did stand in front of a beautiful view, and my heart (and not just my mind) was fully engaged, taking in the scene, finding meaning in it, and being so powerfully nourished by it. I believe when just our mind is present, we only gather information about our surroundings. But when both the heart is also present, we gather knowledge, meaning, and nourishment. And we end up living from that higher and beautiful place, our souls.

So always remember this: if both your mind and heart are not present, you haven't truly experienced where you are. You felt your body stand there, but you didn't feel your soul. You didn't experience beauty. You only *existed* where beauty lies. And we all can exist anywhere, but to *experience* the space in which we stand, the mind and heart must be in the same place we are standing, so that our being is one and unified – in the here and now, in the truth of the moment, and not in the illusion or false promises of everywhere else. Only then will you not be just a body standing there. You will be a soul.

"*Wherever you stand, be the soul of that place.*" — Rumi.

Presence starts with mindfulness, but its experience is not completed until that mindfulness leads to heartfulness. The process of presence starts with engaging the mind with what is happening in the here and now. This means

that we build the muscle of centering it in the present every time we notice it going to the future or the past. To do this, presence has to become a value of the heart and we have to teach this value to the mind. We have to train the mind that there is nothing more valuable than the moment right in front of us, than the people right in front of us, than the blessings right in front of us. We learn to intercept thoughts about the future or past with affirmations like "*there is nothing more valuable than the here and now*," or "*the present is the only space I can grow, change, experience joy, or make a difference in my life and the lives of others.*"

You see, we as human beings go where we see value. And value is related to need. When we feel we need something, we value it more; and as a result, we become more present with it. Let's take prayer for instance. A prayer we forget we *need* is a prayer we won't be present with. Over the years, I have analyzed the psychology of prayer and the way we interact with prayer and our acts of worship. And I found that there is a key ingredient we all have to have in order to shift and transform our presence in prayer and any act of worship. And it is this: remembering we *need* God. The first mistake we make that impacts the quality of our acts of worship is forgetting we need God. Once we forget our need for Him, our heart loses interest in being present and connecting with Him. This is a common problem of creation: arrogance. Arrogance isn't just thinking we are better than others. Arrogance is also thinking we are above needing God. It can be so subtle sometimes. Oftentimes, we are unaware of it. It exists when we just going through the motions as we pray, where our limbs are working but our heart is in sleep-mode, and this is because we forgot that we are in need of this very prayer we are just existing through. We know God does not benefit from our prayer but we pray at times as if He *does* and we are just there physically to check off something He needs. We forget that the prayer is there because we are in need and we will always need to be linked to our Source and Creator. God reminds us in the Qur'an: "*Whoever is grudging is so* ***only towards himself****: Allah (God) has no needs and you are the needy ones. He will substitute other people for you if you turn away, and they will not be like you*" (47:38).

Human beings are driven by fulfilling needs. When we forget our need for God and what He has prescribed for us, our heart is not motivated to be present. Think of how present you are in a conversation you are having with a potential employer in an interview. If you *need* the job, you will be present. If you don't need the job or already have a backup job lined up, you may find yourself mentally checking out. This is why a trait of present people is that they realize that what is right in front of them has something valuable to offer them and they are connected to their need for what lies in the here and now. Whenever we find ourselves not present in our *dua*, in our *zikr*, in our prayers,

we must reignite our connection to how much we *need* these sacred practices.

So the next time you approach your prayer, I encourage you to take a moment before you start and remind yourself of how much you are in need of God, and as you reflect upon your need for Him, I encourage you to say this one statement until your heart feels its significance: "I *need* this prayer." Whether you are having a good day or bad day, whether you are going through difficult or easy circumstances, make it a consistent habit and practice to remind yourself of your constant and eternal need for God. Remember how much you are *always* in need of His help, His guidance, and His mercy. Every time you hear the *athan* (call to prayer), or you see the prayer time has come, this one statement and affirmation of "I *need* this prayer," and the practice of repeating it with belief in your heart, will transform the way you view your prayer, how present you are in that prayer, and you will end your prayer feeling more nourished than when you started. In these moments, you are directing your heart in the best direction, just like a compass. You are reminding yourself that this heart within your chest needs the actions that God has prescribed for it so it can thrive and beautifully lead your being. And every time you lead your heart to what it was created for, it will lead you to what you were created for.

But this practice of reminding yourself how much you need what is right in front of you, can be applied to anything you want to increase your presence with. Before you go spend time with your parents, children, or your spouse, tell yourself, "*I need this time with my parents*," or "*this time with my spouse or children is so valuable*," and watch how you stop looking at your phone and become more attentive to your loved ones. That is because we give attention to what we value, and our lack of presence is rooted in our forgetfulness of what is truly valuable in life and what we truly need to thrive. So, the journey of building the muscle of presence must start with recognizing and cementing the belief within that there is nothing more valuable than the moment and day God gave us. This is something we have to constantly practice, and precisely why I call it a *muscle*, because presence is not a destination we arrive at, but a consistent practice we need to implement throughout our days and life. This can be compared to how we don't stop working out just because we don't see the immediate results or "gains" of our fitness efforts. We continue because we know physical strength and health is a journey, not a destination.

The more we practice mindfulness, by engaging the mind with the here and now, the more information the mind will gather about the present — about the blessings in front of us, the opportunities, the potential, the resources, the beauty, the challenges, and the ways we can impact change. We then need to engage in heartfulness to make sense and derive knowledge, meaning, and nourishment from that information. To do that, we need reflection.

Mindfulness & Heartfulness Through Reflection

Reflection is the bridge between the mind and the heart. It is not a coincidence that in the Qur'an, we are constantly directed to reflect and contemplate — to be proactive in our interaction with the information our mind receives from the world. As God points us to signs or meanings throughout the Qur'an, He emphasizes that they can only be witnessed by those who "***may reflect***" (59:21). God teaches us through the Qur'an and *sunnah* to engage in reflection as a means for the heart to understand, not just the mind. The goal of reflection within Islamic teachings is to awaken the heart, and the heart is the greatest tool of reflection. But the heart's ability to reflect is limited if the mind is not present and also engaged in its own level of reflection. In Islam, there are two types or levels of reflection and contemplation, and they are called "*taffakur*" and "*tadabbur*." Both are great Islamic psychology practices taught from the Qur'an and *sunnah* and are designed to awaken our mind and heart's presence, and subsequently help us derive greater meaning, truth, and nourishment from what we experience and receive from our human experience.

Islamic scholars have differentiated between *taffakur* and *tadabbur* in that *tadabbur* is a more deeper, holistic, and encompassing form of reflection. Through the H.O.M.E Method – in an attempt to simplify and make sense of the deep wealth of knowledge that is on the different types of thinking and reflection within Islamic teachings – *taffakur* is defined as *the mental or mind's cognitive experience of thought and reflection*, while *tadabbur* is *the spiritual, cognitive, and holistic experience* of thought and reflection that requires *both the mind and heart. Taffakur* can be viewed as the mind's search for knowledge and meaning, while *tadabbur* is not just the search but the process of actually *arriving* at a conclusive meaning from the information the mind has collected and reflected upon. In fact, *tadabbur* is the action form of the word *adbaar*, which means "the end."

To practice presence, the mind engages in *taffakur* and mindfulness, to experience and make sense of the information it is collecting and processing from the world. The mind engages in thought and reflection on a mental level and within the rational and logical capacity it has. That information is then sent to the heart for deeper and higher processing and reflection. Through *tadabbur* and heartfulness, the heart filters that information through a God-centered lens — what it knows to be true from the Qur'an and *sunnah* — and derives meaning from what the mind was present with, the information the mind collected, processed, and reflected upon on its level. As the heart derives greater truths and meaning from this information, that information has now become knowledge in the heart, and the heart is more present than ever. As it

connects to that knowledge, it becomes more nourished and fuller. The process of presence is now completed through both mindfulness and heartfulness.

Quiet moments spent in reflection
Settling into our imperfection
Prepare the heart for its resurrection
And redirect its lens to His perfection[155]

The mind's presence fuels the heart's presence, but for many people who live in their minds and lead from the mind, it can be very hard to activate the heart's presence and awakening to what is right in front of them. So the question becomes, what does it mean to activate the heart when you feel like you are leading from your mind? It means to direct your energy to this most sacred part within you. It means to utilize the mind to *focus* on the heart, and to think about its experience. It means to think about the use of this sacred muscle within you as you would direct your focus to a physical muscle you are targeting during a workout. I learned this through my physical workouts over the years, especially when having a personal trainer. Every workout is designed to strengthen specific muscles, but if your mind's focus is *not* on that muscle, you become disconnected from the benefits that workout holds for that muscle. Sometimes, during a workout, a trainer will ask, "*do you feel it here (where you are supposed to feel it)?*" This is one of the ways a trainer knows if you are doing the workout correctly and connected to what you are doing. When I would say, "*No, I don't feel it there,*" she would then say, "*focus on this area or muscle you are working out as you are doing this or that specific movement.*" And that is when I would be awakened to that muscle and the experience of that muscle, by utilizing my mind to be present with the muscle I am targeting throughout a workout. What we utilize our mind to think about and focus on becomes highlighted and our connection to it becomes strengthened. Similarly, we need to utilize our minds to think about, give attention to, and be present with our hearts, so that we can be awakened to its experience. And we can do this by placing our hands on our heart and start connecting to its presence, its needs, and its longing for God. By doing this, we will realize that oftentimes it is not that the heart is not having an experience, it is that we are disconnected from it. Another great practice to help you activate your connection to your heart is to place your right hand on our heart and repeat God's name or an attribute of God we are longing to connect to in a given moment. Try it now and watch how much more present and fuller your heart becomes!

155 Poem by the author.

Practice Mindfulness & Heartfulness Through *Shukr*: Cultivate a Grateful & Appreciative Heart

A key practice that strengthens our muscle of presence is *shukr*, which is gratitude and deep appreciation. There is a mutual and two-way relationship between gratitude and presence. One cannot be grateful without presence, but when one decides to engage in gratitude, they have no choice but to also *be* present. Therefore presence promotes gratitude and gratitude calls for presence.

God tells us in the Qur'an, "*Then remember me, I will remember you. Be grateful to me, and do not reject Me*" (2:152). Gratitude (or *shukr*) is emphasized greatly in Islam, for it awakens the heart to the role of God in one's life, His blessings, and all that He has given us throughout our lives up to the moment we are living. We are constantly surrounded with blessings, but because we are not present both mindfully and heartfully, we can easily miss them and be deprived of what they have to offer us internally and externally. God's blessings, help, and guidance is all around us. We just have to pay attention. When we start engaging in presence and gratitude, we will find that *what* we give our attention to actually grows. We begin to develop an abundant mindset and *heartset* as we recognize the great abundance available to us on our path in this world. A lack of gratitude harms us because it robs the mind and heart from paying attention to what actually exists, and instead to what isn't there. And instead of abundance, all we see is scarcity.

God tells us in the Qur'an, that gratitude brings abundance, as He says, "*If you are grateful, **I will certainly give you more***" (14:7). This is a truth that the Western self-help world has recently highlighted, but it is a truth that was taught to us over 1400 years ago through the Qur'an. Gratitude invites abundance. When we practice gratitude, as promised, God gives us more, but it also awakens us to *see* more. Gratitude opens our mind and heart to see what might have always existed in our life, but we were not attentive to. It is what allows us to see how our grass was *always* green. It refreshes the heart's lens to notice what we may have taken for granted. It centers the mind and heart's focus on the immense blessing, mercy, guidance, love, and resources God has already put in our life, but we have ignored or minimized. We always think joy comes from having more, but it doesn't. It often comes from seeing *more* in what we already have. And, sometimes, it is not about asking God for something new, but rather, asking Him to help our hearts feel nourished, content, and sufficed by Him as our Lord and with what He already gave us.[156]

Our Prophet (ﷺ) exemplified *shukr* so powerfully. He showed us what it means to show deep appreciation and gratitude for who God is and what

156 Poem by the author.

He has already done for us. When Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) would pray for long periods of time, the companions wondered *why*, if he was already guaranteed *jannah*. His answer was: "*Shouldn't I be a grateful servant?*"[157] Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) had a deep appreciation and gratitude for the role God played in his life, for His mercy and kindness towards him, and he didn't take anything God gave him for granted. As a result, his great and deep gratitude and appreciation for God increased his great presence with Him as well.

When we engage in gratitude, we become more present with God and the beauty He placed in our life in the here and now. We remember that we can look for something to complain about or we can look for something to be grateful about. They both take energy, but produce completely different results. If you look for something to complain about, your mind will find it, and your heart will not benefit from that discovery. It will not experience heartfulness, open up, see things differently, or experience a peace and security that can carry you throughout your day. But if you use that *same* energy to go looking for something to be grateful about, your mind will *also* find it, but this time, your heart will expand and become nourished by that discovery. And you will feel yourself positively shift, with a greater mental and emotional readiness to maximize the beauty and blessings God created right in front of you.

Muraqabah

Another great practice that awakens the presence of the heart is *muraqabah*. *Muraqabah* is a practice of Islamic spirituality and it means *to be watchful*. In the H.O.M.E. Method, I define *muraqabah* as a sacred and elevated form of presence and meditation that is an experience of both mindfulness and heartfulness. *Muraqabah* comes from the root Arabic word of *raqabah*, which means to observe or watch over, which is an attribute of God Himself, for one of His beautiful names, is *Ar-Raqib*, the Watchful, as God is the Most Observant and Watchful over us.

In Islam, we are taught to practice *ihsan*, which means to worship God with the deepest connection and presence to the truth that He is always watchful over us. *Ihsan* means spiritual excellence. In a well-known *hadith*, Angel Jibreel was reported to ask Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), "*What is ihsan?*" to which Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) responded, "*To worship Allah (God) as if you see Him, and if you cannot achieve this state of devotion then you must consider that He is looking at you.*"[158] The practice of *muraqabah* is a practice of *ihsan*, for it heightens one's connection to God being with us and watchful of us in every moment.

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157 *Sahīh Muslim*, 2819b.

158 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, 4777.

There is nothing that activates the muscle of presence more and allows us to experience greater mindfulness and heartfulness, than being aware of God's watchfulness of us. The practice of *muraqabah* elevates us to live from our higher self as we become present with God's presence with us. When we are so deeply connected to God's presence with us, how can we not be present with Him and all that He has placed in our life in the here and now?

It is part of our natural state (*fitrah*) and design to elevate and improve ourselves when we know God is watching. In our world today, one of the greatest arguments that atheists present to support their belief that we do not need a God, is that they say people's morality or good behavior does not require a belief in God. But I can tell you from a psychological perspective, this isn't true. Psychological research confirms that people actually perform better and improve their behaviors when they know they are being watched just by other human beings.[159] In psychology, this is called the audience effect or *Hawthorne Effect*, which is the theory that people perform and behave better when they know they are being observed. In social psychology, there is also the recognized concept of social facilitation, the psychological phenomenon where people demonstrate higher level of performance and effort when in the presence of others as opposed to when they are alone.[160] In Industrial-Organizational psychology, we see this truth as well, where employee performance, job satisfaction, and productivity was found to increase when employees were noticed, observed, and paid attention to.[161] And while some of these studies note that the type of supervision (good vs. bad supervision) is what truly matters in influencing an employee's performance, these studies highlight the impact of just another ***human being*** watching us, so then how can we say that we as human beings are unaffected by being watched by God, the Ever Living, the Most Powerful, and the One who controls our very breath, life, future, and existence? Also, God's supervision is unlike the supervision of imperfect supervisors. God's supervision never hurts us. It only serves us and our growth. Our potential becomes maximized when we are connected to God's supervision.

Our connection to God, His watchfulness of us, and His presence with us, is the most powerful experience. It is what can completely transform individuals, relationships, and societies. It cultivates within us a beautiful sensitivity to how we speak and act in the world, knowing that we are seen by the Most High. But it also gives us access to His immense love and care for us. It gives us access to His mercy towards us. It heightens our connection to all the good

159 Baranowski, R. J. (1992); Hamilton, A. & Lind, F. (2016).

160 Mcleod, S. (2023).

161 Landsberger, H. A. (1958); Gopika, N. & Dubey, N. (2023).

He created for us in our world, and what is most important and worthy of our attention. Through this practice of *ihsan* (worshiping God knowing He is watchful over us), we in turn cultivate more *taqwa* (God-consciousness) and become watchful over our own selves, which is precisely what *muraqabah* is.

In the Western teachings of mindfulness, we are taught to play the role of the *observer.* The practice of mindfulness is about observing the happenings of our inner world, such as our thoughts, beliefs, and emotions, without judgment. We play the role of the witness, observing what is happening within us without reactivity, and instead intentional responsivity. When we engage in judgment over our thoughts and emotions, we are no longer the observer. We are no longer outside the box, but immersed in our every thought and emotion, and this is likely to produce more toxic shame and a negative interpretation of what we are experiencing, which is *then* likely to cause us to *react.* But when we withhold judgment, and we interact without immediately shaming ourselves, and without falsely or toxicly defining our inner experience, and we simply hold a space for what comes up for us inwardly, we will find that instead of reacting, we learn to *respond.* Reactions come from emotion that have not yet been processed. A response is an intentional choice we make after we have processed our thoughts and emotions. This is what mindfulness is about.

Muraqabah, as I previously mentioned, is a more elevated form of mindfulness, that includes the experience of the heart. This is why I define it as an experience of both mindfulness and heartfulness. In *muraqabah*, as indicated in its linguistic meaning, we are also engaging in the process of being an observer. But through *muraqabah*, we are not just observing our thoughts and emotions. It is much broader than that. *Muraqabah* is the experience of also observing and being watchful over our mind, heart and *nafs*, their interactions, and the functions of cognition, emotions, and behaviors they are influencing. *Muraqabah* is a key practice of the H.O.M.E. Method, for it is what ignites a holistic presence with our *psycho-spiritual system*, its entities, and their alignment. Through *muraqabah*, we practice being observant over our mind (its thoughts, interpretations, and resulting emotions), the *nafs* (its discomforts, desires, and the resulting thoughts and emotions we have because of them), and the heart (its state, cognitive and emotional experience, and where it is facing: the lower self or higher self). We start to notice when we say "*I want this or want that,*" and where that want is coming from — our *nafs* or our heart that seeks to be aligned with God and our higher self. *Muraqabah* helps us cultivate a deep presence with our inner world and a higher sensitivity to the agitations of our heart, where we begin to more easily recognize when we place ourselves in situations that do not serve our soul.

Above all, through *muraqabah*, we do not just become more aware of the shifts within our inner world, but we also become more deeply connected to God, the Most High, being watchful of those shifts, and of the various experiences of our mind, heart, *nafs*, and how they impact our cognitive processes, emotional reactions, and behaviors. As we observe, we are connected to the Greatest Observer. As we watch over, we are connected to the Most Watchful. And as we are met with confusion, limitations, or misalignment, we turn to Him as the Greatest Knower of our inner world, the One who knows us better than we know ourselves.

Identify 5 Things In Your Present

A great way to become more present and to reduce anxiousness you feel in any moment, is to pay attention to realities happening in your physical surroundings, utilizing your senses. This is a key practice we utilize in mindfulness, where you start paying attention to things in your present that you can *see*, *hear*, *feel* or *touch*. What this does is it connects you to the truths that are actually occurring and disconnects you from the illusions or "*what ifs*" your mind might be occupied with. You may start noticing the tree in front of you and how tall and beautiful it is. You may start to connect to the fact that you feel the breeze on your skin. You start to notice the color of your couch and how comfortable it is. You start to notice how colorful the vegetables you are cooking are. You pay attention to the vibrant smell of the food you are making. You start to pay attention to the sound of your children playing.

You start to identify what you see, hear, and feel in the moment you are alive, which is *now*, the only moment you are guaranteed. This is a great grounding technique to bring your mind back to the here and now, when you find yourself ruminating about something that passed or worried about something that might happen. When you do this, something beautiful and powerful occurs. Not only do you become more present, but now the mind starts to serve the awakening of the heart. The mind now is providing the heart with all this information about what is actually happening in the present, whereas before, it was off in a time that isn't actually existing, and as a result, the heart was left malnourished. The heart can only be nourished and awakened by what is actually happening, not by what *could* happen, or what has already happened.

This practice of identifying key truths in your physical surroundings awakens the heart to actually recognize more beauty around you. I remember practicing this one day while I was ironing a dress that I had for years. As I was ironing my dress, I started to direct my attention to the colors and designs of my dress. I started to notice all the colors – the blues, greens, and even the slight pops of purple – that I hadn't really noticed before, but started to stand out so beautifully. I started to appreciate this dress and its design more than

ever, that when I wore it that day, I just felt more beautiful wearing it than I ever have. This is a dress I had worn many times before, but that day, it was like I was wearing it for the first time. This is the power of presence. What we give our attention to grows, and when we practice paying attention to what is in our present (our surroundings, our tasks, what we have), we realize that the grass is not greener on the other side — the side where our mind often wanders to — but rather, our grass is just as green right where our being is, but we often are just too busy looking everywhere but *here*. So take some time to pay the same attention to your own grass, to what God already put in your life. Try to be present with whatever task you are engaged with, even the tasks that have been part of your routine for years. Give your presence to whatever you are doing, and watch how the most mundane of tasks become more special every time. In addition, increase your presence with those you love as much as you can. And increase in the presence you give yourself and all that you need to thrive and grow. And try as hard as you can to resist the inclination you may have to escape the *now* when things become uncomfortable, or to compare your life to others. Increase your attention to what already exists, show appreciation, and you will see how God will show you just how green it is where you are already standing.

Deep Breathing

Deep breathing is a powerful holistic exercise that supports our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being, and is known to help many people who struggle with anxiety, because it centers them in the present. Breathing reminds us that there is nothing more important than the here and now, because it is the only moment that we are promised life. We are not promised a breath in the next moment. We are not promised life at the end of the day. Our breath reminds us that we are alive *now* and that is a sacred gift. As we inhale and exhale and feel our lungs being filled with air, we are reminded that "*if God allowed me to have this breath, He still sees potential in me and there is more that He wants me to gain.*"

When we connect to our breath, we are connecting to our body, and our body is the part of us that already knows how to be present. Every cell, every organ, every anatomical system in our body is already present and submitting to its Creator. We do not control it. Our body needs to be present to function beautifully and help you thrive. It is already in submission to God in every moment and every day. Your heart beats by His command. Every cell in your body functions to fulfill the purpose He created it for. Every breath you take is only by His will. So, as you inhale a beautiful deep breath, and as you feel your lungs fill with air, remember this truth. Be present with the blessing of

this action and do not take it for granted. Feel that connection to your body. Let your body remind you that you are *here*, in the most sacred space and time, the present. Let it remind you of *your* purpose. Let your body teach you to be present with God and to obey Him beautifully as it does.

So whenever you struggle to be present or feel yourself becoming anxious about what the future holds, remember to take a deep breath, as many as you can, where each time, you inhale deeply through your nose for a count of 4, and then exhale slowly through your mouth. Doing this daily, and especially when you are stressed or anxious, will help you become more centered, more peaceful, more present, and more connected to the One who is most worthy of your worship, praise, gratitude, and attention. A great exercise I practice with myself and with my students, especially as I provide them with guided meditations, is having them practice deep breaths while placing their right hand over their heart. Through this technique, I am not only connecting them to the power of their breath but to the most sacred and intelligent facet within them. As they place their hand on that beating heart while they are taking deep breaths, they remember that they are safe and alive but also *Who* has given them life and allowed their heart to not only beat, but have the psycho-spiritual faculties of thinking, feeling, reflecting, and connecting. As they continue to breathe, they remember that this moment is all that matters. It is the most important reality that needs their attention. The future is not real. It does not exist right now. And the past is no longer here. What is *here* is their body, their heart, their soul, the people in their life, and everything that truly matters, that God put right in front of them in the sacred moment of *now*.

Engage in Physical Exercises that Challenge You

I learned a lot about presence through working out over the years. It was through engaging in exercises that challenged me that truly taught me how being present reduces the anxiousness we may feel in this world when we are fixating on what could happen tomorrow. This is a powerful lesson I learned years ago as I was engaged in a very difficult and challenging exercise I hadn't done before.

This exercise required that I start pulling on a rope that was attached to a heavy weighted sled that was placed a few meters away. The goal was to keep pulling on this rope until the sled reached me, while keeping the right physical form to maximize the workout. And we had to repeat this exercise 4 times. That day, I felt like I walked into Rocky Balboa's gym and I was beginning to feel anxious. But it was something I never tried before and I was excited to challenge myself. When I started to pull the sled back to where I was, I realized very quickly how difficult this workout was going to be and wasn't

sure how I was going to get through it once, yet alone four times. I started to get really anxious as I fixated on how far away this sled was and how much more discomfort and work I have to go through. As I was a few minutes into pulling the rope and still feeling this sled is not close enough, my trainer came up to me and said something so powerful that resonated with me very deeply and helped me get through the workout on a physical level, but also on a mental and emotional level. This was a lesson on the power of presence that can be applied to every area of our lives. And it left me in awe and amazed with how God teaches us in the most subtle and beautiful ways. After all, He is *Al-Latif*, the Sublimely Gracious and Subtle. Seeing that I was new to this and that I was getting tired quickly and losing control of the rope and my physical form, the trainer said this to me: "*Do not focus on the sled. Do not panic. Just keep your eye on the rope right in front of you, where your hand goes to pull. That is all you have to focus on, and do not look farther than that point.*"

I immediately started to apply this advice. I stopped looking at the sled and started looking at the point on the rope I was pulling, that was right in front of me. Once I applied this advice, I felt something amazing happen. I started to calm down and be more in control. I wasn't anxious anymore about where the sled was. I felt settled and more connected to my breathing. I actually felt like the workout even got a bit easier. Before, I was focusing so much on the sled that I was so disconnected from where I was at, from how I was breathing, and from even perfecting my form. I was also letting the natural discomfort and physical pressure that comes with a challenging workout keep me from maximizing the workout. My focus on the sled and my anxiousness about how far it was left me feeling like I was exerting all this effort and getting nowhere. I felt like I was getting tired very quickly and depleting my energy. But once I let go of the *need* to know how far the sled was and actually started focusing on my efforts to pull the rope that was right in front of me, I felt like I reserved my energy for what mattered and did not burden myself more than I could bear. I started to feel like I could actually get through 4 rounds of this workout. And with God's help, I did, *alhamdulilah*.

This lesson taught me that sometimes we exert our energy towards focusing on things that are beyond our control, and that leaves us frantic, unsettled, and disconnected from what is right in front of us. It reflected the connection that anxiety has with our need to focus on the future. The more I focused on where the sled was, the more anxious I got. And the more anxious I got, the more disconnected I was from my form and from my breathing and what was more important in my present. When we disconnect from important things in our workout (such as our breathing and form), we actually minimize the benefits we can receive from doing the workout, and we may actually hurt ourselves.

This truth applies to our life as a whole. God tells us in the Qur'an that we human beings are anxious beings, as He says, "*Indeed, mankind was created anxious*" (Qur'an, 70:9). Too many times, we become so focused on what is *next* in our lives, what is in the future, that we disconnect from what is right in front of us, our present. This anxiousness leaves us exerting so much energy towards what we cannot control rather than reserving our energy for what we can actually have an impact on, what is right in front of us and our efforts. As a result, we are often disconnected from ourselves and are often left deprived from the benefits we can receive from what God put right in front of us. But, when we focus more on our task at hand, the truths happening in front of us, and our efforts over the outcomes, we actually feel more in control, and we take our power back from things we can't control (i.e. future outcomes). As a result, we do not burden ourselves more than we can bear. And we start to maximize our efforts and our entire day.

This is what I learned from engaging in challenging workouts over the years, and why I recommend doing the same. Exercise should be a constant in our life, and especially for people who struggle with presence or anxiety. Not only is exercise proven to help reduce anxiety, but it also teaches us the power of taming our *nafs* as we get through the discomfort of a challenging workout. The *nafs* wants us to quit the second we are uncomfortable, but as we give our attention to what is happening for us in the workout and not just the agitation or pain, the heart takes the lead. As a result, the *nafs*'s voice becomes lower and it stops bullying the mind to focus on a future moment that will bring it relief. The heart, when in command, guides us to focus on what matters, what is happening for us and not against us, even when we don't feel good. When the heart is the lead, we learn to be present with the discomfort of now, so that we can reap the fruits or "gains" of tomorrow. It is interesting how in the world of fitness, they say, "*your body will keep going as long as your mind tells it to*," but I say, "*your body will keep going as long as your heart is in the lead*," for when the heart is connected to its "*why*" – its motivation for working out – nothing can stop the body, even temporary discomfort.

Build The Muscle of Patience

There is a strong link between patience and presence. The muscle of presence strengthens the muscle of patience (*sabr*), and vice versa. Throughout the Qur'an, God teaches us to practice patience, for it requires that a person faces and sits with the dread and discomfort that the present at times can bring, while trusting that God is in full control, but also that whatever we are going through has good in it for us.

"*Only those who are steadfast in patience, only those who are blessed with great righteousness, will attain such goodness.*" (Qur'an, 41:35)

Patience is sitting with anxiety or sadness. It is sitting with the difficulty of *now* while holding on to hope for what God holds for us tomorrow. A person who practices patience knows that it is okay to *not* be okay. It is okay to not feel good all the time. It is okay to wait for what is good in the long run (the *halal* and *tayyib*) rather than give in to the temporary feel-good rush of the moment (which is at times *haram* and not *tayyib*). It is okay to be uncomfortable with not knowing and the uncertainty of the next moment, as you wait for God to show you the way.

"*The period of waiting patiently for release from suffering is an act of worship.*" — Imam Al-Ghazali

Patience is knowing there is value in the present even if it is difficult. It is knowing that there is peace to be found through every pain, easy that sits right next to every difficulty, beauty to be discovered through every struggle, and treasures to be uncovered behind every hardship. It is believing that God intends good for us through it all. Through patience, we begin to actively reflect on what He is trying to bring to our awareness through every experience. Patience is knowing that we *need* this test to grow, thrive, and succeed not only in this world but the far more eternal world to come. The struggle we are going through is the means to what He has in store for us in the future and eternally.

When your strength
and resources
start to dry up
Know that the earth
also dries up
And as you wait
for God's help
Know that the dried earth
waits too
But be certain
that the rain after a drought
is no ordinary rain
And His help after patience
is no ordinary help
So, when He withholds
stay firm
Because when He gives
it pours[162]

162 Poem by the author.

When we learn to be patient, we learn to be present with all that God contains for us in the here and now, even when things are hard. Through this presence, God unveils us to see beauty right where we are, and to see what we were blinded from during times of ease. Only when we are patient and present, can we be awakened to what no longer serves us, or to a strength we never knew we had. Only through patience and presence can we uncover the treasures that will lead us to God and to be who He wants us to be.

Through patience, we learn to accept the here and now as it is. We learn that we can't keep the sun from setting, just as we can't hasten the break of dawn. All we can do is maximize the light while it lasts and be patient with the darkness when it settles. And in time, we learn to carry our heart through both the light and the darkness, through ease and difficulty. We learn to worship neither, but rather the Lord of both.

Spend A Lot of Time in Nature

Through connecting with nature, I am reminded that all creation tells a story that points to God and what He is teaching us about Him, ourselves, and our journey. We need a constant connection to nature for it reminds us to slow down, be still, and witness *sacred presence* in action. Nature reminds us we have a soul that longs to worship God just as beautifully as all in nature does. It is so important to take our heart to the spaces that allow us to feel the truth and element of life within our being. The spaces that allow us to feel what we cannot put into words. The spaces that allow us to feel what we cannot see. The spaces that allow us to feel the presence of our soul.

We are always so connected to our physical self, and our physical surroundings, but there are spaces – whether they be the forest, the ocean, the mountains, an area full of trees, a space to sit and watch the sunrise or sunset – that God created to connect us to the essence of our being. Because once we can feel this non-temporary, powerful, and permanent force within us, we will most lovingly and eagerly long to connect to its Source.

Build the Muscle of Sitting Still

Our ability to be more present requires that we build the muscle of sitting and being still. Even our presence in prayer requires the work of learning to be still and present outside of prayer. If prayer is the only time we are silent with no outside distractions, then we will spend our entire prayer trying to accustom ourselves to the stillness. We are not used to it. We are uncomfortable with being still. We get in the car and immediately turn on something to listen to. When there is a slight gap of silence in a conversation, we become anxious and rush to fill it. We need to constantly say something or do something.

We rarely even take time to take full, deep breaths. The silence agitates us. It feels empty. We escape from it constantly. We pick up the phone, put on headphones, browse the internet, play a game, read post after post on social media. Distractions and noise are constantly surrounding us. So when we finally sit in silence, we become aware of another noise: our thoughts, emotions, needs, or the emptiness and void within that we didn't take the time to fill. The voice of our inner world, which was there the whole time, is now really loud in this silence we sit in. We become aware of it. We begin to listen to it and because we have not spent time being present with it or learning how to direct it, we let it take us in a million different directions. This is what happens to us in prayer. We spend so much time amongst noise that when we finally silence the world around us to start praying, we become aware of the noise that exists within our inner world, that we never got accustomed to sitting with. We dismiss this of course by attributing the distraction automatically to *Shaytan* (Satan) and tell ourselves that this is part of the spiritual struggle. We finish prayer and we re-enter the noise of our outer world, without taking any personal responsibility. And this cycle continues.

This world has a way of pushing us far away from any silence or any stillness, and *Shaytan* plays a huge role in this. He knows our *nafs* is like a child that loves to chase instant gratification and hates any momentary discomfort. He will work hard to keep this *nafs* from sitting still. He will make silence look unappealing and the noise appear glamorous. He will make the present moment appear like a barren earth while a future moment we create in our minds appears like it holds all the fruits and solutions. He will wrap falsehood with the illusion of promise, so that we chase mirage after mirage and gain nothing from what is in front of us, while constantly losing our time and energy. We chase the noise because he presents it as beauty and we reject the silence because He presents it as emptiness. So we leave the rich space of the here and now to chase what seems like treasure, whether that be going on our phones to escape the "emptiness" of now, or letting our mind lead us to ruminate about the past or future. But we know that the treasures of the world are not in plain sight. The best paths don't always hide behind the prettiest doors, and anything of value is never so easily attained. They come slowly and beautifully with presence, patience, and a heart that always prioritizes truth.

The more peace
you feel within,
the less noise
you will need outside of you.[163]

163 Poem by the author.

We can start by taking little steps to being more present and still in our day outside of prayer, and we will see how that will actually enhance the quality and presence we experience in our prayers. We can get in our car and train ourselves to not always put something on to listen to or call someone right away. We can sit on a train and be okay with not scrolling through social media or finding another distraction to make the time pass. In the beginning, as you sit in this uncomfortable silence, your thoughts may be loud. They themselves may distract you from being still and present. Our thoughts are often anywhere but the present. They are constantly wavering back from the past to the future, stopping briefly every now and then into the here and now. But keeping them in the present is a challenge, and I came to learn that this is because we give our mind the wheel to navigate us and the direction of our hearts. By making the mind the lead, we let it take us in a million directions, leaving the heart without attention and nourishment. I learned that the key is to be in control of your mind, not the other way around. The key is to use the mind to serve and fuel the presence of the heart.

It is in creating moments of silence outside of prayer, that we have the opportunity to practice guiding our thoughts in the right direction, by being attentive to what is right in front of us. We start paying attention to our breathing, our heart, and the beauty in front of us in that moment. We can pay attention to the trees in front of us and say "*subhanAllah*." We can appreciate the gentle wind caressing our face. We can appreciate the rain or the warmth of the sun. We can be content with just sitting on a bench being present with silence itself. And when we can utilize the silence to engage in God's remembrance and positive reflections, we will find that the agitation will slowly start to fade. The silence no longer becomes the enemy but rather, it becomes our most treasured haven. Now, when we enter prayer, the stillness isn't as agitating. We are more accustomed to it, so our focus is now on what is actually happening. What actually is happening is that you are standing in front of your Creator. Your Creator is looking at you. He is listening to you. He loves you. He gave you this prayer so you can experience the best joy on earth: loving and connecting with Him.

So, make time for the present, for the quiet moments, for the times you sit still with nature. Be present with what is right in front of you. Stop chasing the noise and anything that will distract you from the voice of your own heart. Do not let the glitters of the world, the illusion of beauty, drive you into the abyss of emptiness, and do not let *Shaytan* deprive you from the depths of beauty that God holds for you in those quiet moments, in the stillness, in the here and now. Keep taking your heart to the quiet spaces, because once you get past the initial discomfort – the strangeness, the fear of emptiness – you

will realize that it is in these sacred places and moments, that God allows you to find all that you were chasing everywhere else. And with God, there are no mirages, just truth. And the greatest beauty to be experienced in this world lies in connecting our hearts to truth.

When water is still
it becomes a mirror for the sky,
the same sky it descended from.
Only in the stillness
can water reflect its source
and what is higher and grander.
I learned from this connection
between the water and the sky
and why we need the stillness too
It is where my heart
can also reflect its Source,
be a mirror for what is higher and grander
and where my soul can remember
where it came from.[164]

Take Frequent *Zikr* Walks

A great way to build the muscle of presence is to take *zikr* walks, where you go for a walk, first and foremost intending the walk itself for God, and setting a goal to do a certain form (or forms) of *zikr* the entire time. *Zikr* walks are walks you take where you train your mind and heart to be present by utilizing *zikr* as your anchor. So every time you find yourself thinking about the future, thinking about the past, or ruminating on something that is bothering you, you will try to catch yourself as soon as possible and come back to the *zikr* you committed to saying when you started your walk. Whether that *zikr* is *subhanAllah*, *alhamdulilah*, *astaghfurAllah*, or even a name of God that speaks to a struggle you are going through that day, your job on this *zikr* walk is to come back to your *zikr* and stay present with it as much as you can. The goal is *not* perfection, but to keep coming back to your anchor, the remembrance of God, every time you find yourself leaving the sacred space of *now*.

As you continue to walk and you do your *zikr*, you will see that you are not only benefiting physically as you connect to your body, its health, and its amazing ability to move, but you're now connecting to the Source of everything you have, and everything you need. And when you do that, a holistic transformation takes place, where you are nourishing yourself not only

164 Poem by the author.

physically, but spiritually, mentally, and emotionally. The walk itself becomes a sacred form of *ibadah* as you made the intention that you are walking for God's sake. You start to see how God-centered walking, and filling that walk with His remembrance, is an act of great *shukr* in itself, an expression of gratitude and appreciation for the body and inner tools He gave you. So, I encourage you to take frequent *zikr* walks as much as you can in life. Leave the headphones at home. Put your phone away. Anchor your mind, heart, and being in the remembrance of God. And watch how He helps you beautifully cultivate greater presence, not only with Him, but with yourself, and everyone and everything else in your life.

Intentions

Finally, intentions are a great and powerful practice to help us cultivate greater presence in our life, but this is an area that will be extensively covered in the next chapter.

Important Reminder to Practice What You Just Learned

This chapter offered you several practices that can empower your mindful and heartful presence each day. It is time to identify one practice from this chapter that you will commit to practicing *today*. In fact, I encourage you to not move on to the next chapter until you do so. Whether you pause to take a few deep breaths, engage in *shukr*, or simply sit still for 5 minutes while reflecting on God being *Ar-Raqib* and watchful over you, know that application is where the transformative power lies! Remember, knowledge without practice does not truly benefit us. Only when we attempt to practice what we learn do we really begin to reap the holistic benefits and fruits of the knowledge we gain.

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Living By H.O.M.E.
Build the Psycho-Spiritual Muscle of Setting God-Centered Intentions

The practice of setting intentions holds for us great psycho-spiritual power, which means it benefits us not only psychologically but also spiritually. But despite intentions being a central and foundational practice in Islam, many Muslims are disconnected from their power and the immense role they can play in their daily spiritual, mental, and emotional alignment and growth. Everything in Islam is designed to serve us holistically, and the practice of being intentional sets us up to receive great psychological and spiritual rewards.

From a psychological point of view, the practice of setting intentions can play a crucial role in helping us feel less anxious and gaining greater mental and emotional peace. This is because it facilitates a process where we have to turn inward and be present with our inner world, the world we have the power to navigate and control. You see, the more we turn outward and focus on external factors, the less grounded and in control we will feel, and the more anxiety and powerlessness we will feel as well. Taking the time to set an intention before we engage in any action protects us from turning outward and attaching to external factors we *can't* control. And we need this protection more than ever, especially in today's world, where we are constantly influenced to turn outward before we turn inward, and to measure our actions by external factors like people's reactions (i.e., their approval or "likes" on social media), monetary value, status, fame, or how the action itself can move us forward in worldly terms. And we can fall into the trap of judging our actions by these factors we have no power over. But when we turn inward to assess the truth and core value driving our intentions, we become less attached to the uncontrollable factors outside of us. We instead activate our heart's connection to what is in our power today, the reality and truth in front of us, rather than all the uncertainties or false illusions we think the future may hold. We become more present with the value of the action itself, and we learn to leave the outcome to God. Essentially, through the practice of setting intentions, we focus in on your "why," and as a result, we will find that we can more easily leave the "how" to God, which then in turn strengthens our ability to practice *tawakul*, as we focus on what is in our responsibility– our intentions and efforts – and leave the rest in God's hands.

Through building the psycho-spiritual muscle of setting intentions, we not only enhance our ability to be present with God and ourselves, but we also end up experiencing greater agency over our choices and how we respond to what we experience. We become more centered as we root ourselves in our intentions, which is our inner value, rather than outer values we have no agency over. This in turn increases our mental clarity — as we declutter ourselves of false values that aren't really valuable — and emotional groundedness — as we direct our attention to what is truly valuable for us. Above all, the practice of setting intentions (rooted in the right values) provides great nourishment for the heart. And while there are many great values that can nourish the heart, there is no greater nourishment for the heart than intentions that are rooted in our Highest Value.

Intend to Ascend

Sincerity (or *ikhlaas)* is a core value and station of Islam. God tells us in the Qur'an, "*...serve Allah (God), being sincere to Him in obedience*" (39:2). To be sincere, one's intentions have to be placed through a process where they are rectified, purified, truthified, and elevated in the direction of God. And this is precisely *why* the practice of setting sincere intentions leads to our ascension.

First and foremost, setting intentions elevates us not only on a spiritual level, but on a mental and emotional level as well, because they put a halt to our habit of mindlessly and also heart*lessly* engaging in our actions – what is called being on "cruise control," where we are going through the motions without a present heart or mind. But more importantly, the practice of setting intentions gives us the opportunity to elevate or ascend beyond the lower self and align ourselves with the soul's needs and our Highest Value. Through setting intentions, we are making a choice to either lead from the heart (which serves our higher self), or from our lower self, the *nafs*. Every time we take a few moments to assess our "*why*" and mindfully and heartfully select our intentions, we have the opportunity to rise above our lower-order needs (the needs of the *nafs*) and serve our higher-order needs (the needs of the *ruh*). When we select intentions that are driven by the *nafs*, we do not grow. We become stuck and more attached to lower-self needs. Selecting *nafs*-driven intentions only fuels the growth and inflation of our *nafs* and ego, which in turn only increases unhelpful emotions and behaviors that keep us stuck in cycles that do not promote our holistic well-being.

Every time we choose an intention that is driven by our *nafsi* (*nafs*-promoting) desires, we are simultaneously making the *choice* to allow our lower self to lead us. And when the *nafs* is the root of our intentions, the heart gets no benefit from the action we are about to do, but the opposite is

also true: when the heart is the root of our intentions, the *nafs* gets no benefit from the action we are about to do. As my teacher used to say, "*true ikhlaas (sincerity) is hard because the nafs doesn't get a share.*"

Cultivating *ikhlaas* requires purifying the heart from the actions of the *nafs*. It requires that the heart has none other than God as its Highest Value. It requires that we worship God alone and no other false idol. When the heart has no higher or greater value than God, then naturally our actions become rooted in intentions that are for the sake of God. Over the years, I explored what "*for the sake of God*" truly means. This is because the concept of "*for the sake of God*" confused me early on in my path, and I saw the same confusion in many of my students when I started teaching the importance of living intentionally for the sake of God.

Islam gives value to everything we do, and intentions are what determine the value of an action. This is a truth Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us when he said, "*Actions are according to intentions, and everyone will get what was intended...*"[165] Intentions are what give our actions greater importance. And setting intentions is about *setting* the heart in the direction of greater meaning through what we do in life. This is why I teach the concept of *heartset* and not just mindset through the H.O.M.E. Method, for it is not just our mind that needs to be set in the direction of value and meaning, but the heart needs to be set, too, and intentions are a great way to do that.

When we intend an action for the sake of God, I believe what we are essentially doing is setting the heart in the direction of God and seeking the value that our action has with God. We are asking questions like, "*Is this action pleasing to God?*" "*Is this a valuable action in front of God, an action He would reward?*" or "*In what ways is the action I am about to do pleasing to the One I have claimed is my Highest Value?*" When we attempt to do an action for the sake of God, what we are doing is looking for a way to connect this worldly action with God, the next world, and the eternal success of our soul. We are training our heart to look beyond this temporary worldly life and to see our soul's permanent home, the home we are preparing for while we are in this world. True sincerity in our intentions is looking beyond the *nafs*, seeing beyond our lower self and its desires, and fixating on serving the needs of our higher self. It doesn't mean that we aren't *aware* of the worldly benefit our actions also hold for us but *what* true sincerity and "*for the sake of God*" means is that despite that awareness, what we hope and desire to receive in this world still isn't our greatest priority or value. When we cultivate true *ikhlaas*, we are saying that God being pleased with us is our highest priority and value over any worldly

165 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, 54.

benefit or any person being pleased with us for the action we are doing. True *ikhlaas* is the act of prioritizing God's reward over a worldly reward. It is prioritizing our higher self over our lower self. It is **choosing *heart over ego***.

"*'Lo, to God belongs sincere allegiance,' free from the taints of otherness and egoism...*"[166] — Al-Shaykh Ibn al-'Arabi (ﷺ)

We as human beings are always driven by needs. The goal of a Muslim is to align our needs with the One who created us, and to worship Him sincerely by intending our actions for Him alone, emptying the heart of any other desire except to please Him and align ourselves with what serves our path to Him. Only then, when the heart is beautified with such sincerity, can our entire being experience true freedom, peace, and guidance.

"*The person who devotes himself sincerely to Allah (God) for forty days, streams of wisdom will flow from his heart to his tongue.*"[167]
— Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ)

Intentions Set You Up to Receive MORE

Today, "living intentionally" has become a popular concept and teaching in the Western self-help and psychology world. Many non-Muslims have testified to the amazing holistic benefits that living with intention has brought into their lives, just by simply directing their attention to a specific goal or outcome. Imagine then if we, as Muslims, implemented the sacred practice of setting intentions that God and His beloved Prophet (ﷺ) taught us over 1400 years ago. If setting intentions and living intentionally in *itself* brings so much value to people's lives just by setting their intentions in the direction of what they deem valuable, without even directing those intentions to God, imagine then the value we will experience when our intentions are set in the direction of the Most High. What we receive from God depends on our intention and that includes the nourishment our heart receives when we set intentions that are in line with Him. So, if intentions set you up to receive benefit and value from what you are doing, imagine then what you would be set up to receive if your intentions are sincerely for God, if your actions are done with God being your highest value and concern.

Intentions invite greater *barakah* (the power and value of blessings) into our lives. *Barakah* is that great inner treasure that only God can place into an action, where we find ourselves receiving more than what we thought that action was meant to give us. *Barakah* is what allows that action to contribute to

166 "Merits of the Soul" (n.d.), referencing Qur'an, 39:3.

167 Al-Suyuti, al-Durr al-Manthur, vol. 2, page 237.

our growth and well-being. *Barakah* is the *life* of our experiences in this world, and therefore why we should always ask God to place *barakah* in everything we have or do: in our actions, in our sight, in our hearing, and in all the ways we utilize our senses. But receiving *barakah* requires that we never abandon the practice of intentions, for intentions are what orient our inner compass towards God, to receive the *barakah* He holds for us. If we are mindlessly and *heartlessly* engaging in an action, without directing our heart to God, we rob ourselves of great blessings, for He is the only One who can essentially *bless* what we do. And when He does, we will always find that our actions (even the smallest deed) are bearing more fruits for us to benefit from.

Today, many people are not experiencing nourishment from what they are doing, not because their actions are not good, but it is because their actions are void of *barakah*. And this is what we have to understand: an action on its own is not necessarily what gives us value, benefit and nourishment. A person may get eight hours of sleep and still not feel rested.They may be busy all day and still not be productive. They may have money and still not be wealthy. They might be engaging in a daily skin care routine and have access to the most expensive beauty products, and still not have a face that exudes light (*nur*). They may talk a lot but still not express themselves. They may be surrounded with blessings and still not be blessed. The existence of something in your life does not always translate into internal nourishment, value, growth, and peace – essentially *barakah*. That requires living intentionally, being present with what you are about to do, and being connected to the God-centered "why," behind everything you do. It requires that you prioritize the nourishment of your heart over your *nafs* (or ego).

Always remember that one day, we will wish we focused on our intentions more than on our experiences. We will wish we were more connected to what is internal than external. We will wish we mindfully intended every word, action, and place we set foot in for His sake. You see, experiences come and go but our intentions have a value that transcends time and place. Living intentionally with God as our highest value, holds for us rewards and benefits in a reality and realm that awaits us, but it also improves our inner state and the quality of our path on our way there. Through our intentions, God brings our present to life, awakens our souls, unveils the beauty that lies in the ordinary, and adds a ton of beauty to what we thought couldn't be more beautiful. He allows us to derive meaning from our experiences and access the blessings He has to offer us through them. And most importantly, He allows our intentions to continuously bear fruits for us long after the present has passed and even after our souls have passed, too, to the next world.

Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) said that Allah (God) (swt) said: "*Ikhlaas is a secret from my secrets and I place it in the heart of my servant who is my beloved.*"[168]

The question then becomes: how do we set *sincere* intentions that contribute to our ascension? The answer is: the heart *must* become the lead. If God is our highest value, then the heart needs to be the leader within our being, for it is the only facet within us that is designed to set the most beautiful and lofty intentions for the sake of God and what serves our higher self. You may think, the mind is the tool that sets intention. To that I say this: intentions may start their formation in the mind, but are set in the heart. We may use our mind to think of the reasons why we are doing something, but the actual intention is not set until the heart accepts, believes, and prioritizes that truth. When we engage in setting intentions, it doesn't matter what our mind knows, it matters what our heart *believes*, prioritizes, and how it moves our limbs to act accordingly. Therefore, God-centered intentions that promote the peace of our higher self need to come from the heart, not simply from what we *know* in the mind and most definitely not from the *nafs*. Also, it is important to remember that the mind is created to be a servant, and will serve the facet within us that we are leading from and intending from. If we are leading from our *nafs*, the *nafs* will most likely attempt to utilize the mind as its servant and in service of what it wants to do. It will search for the information stored in the mind that supports its action or justifies it. For example, a person may desire to go somewhere that is *haram* like the club, and because it is the *nafs* driving this desire, if we give it the lead, it will search the mind for information like, "*Well, I know someone who converted because they met a Muslim in the club.*" The *nafs* is using information the mind collected to support its desires and intentions. But if the heart is the lead, the mind (and what it knows) will be utilized to serve our alignment with our higher self. The heart will search for the right information stored in the mind *or* start guiding the mind to search for the right information (i.e. verses from the Qur'an, *hadiths*, or consulting with the right people) that will *not* support actions driven by the desire of the *nafs* and instead support actions that serve the health of our souls.

Our lower self (the *nafs*) is not the facet within us we want to intend from and live from. Why would we want to, knowing that our *nafs* does not even live beyond this lower world? Don't we want to live and intend from the place within us that transcends beyond this temporary worldly life? Unlike our *nafs*, it is our *ruh* – our higher self – that does not die here, and will get to witness many of the rewards of our sincere intentions in the next world. And it is our heart that is designed to serve this most permanent part within us. And one of the greatest ways it can is through setting God-centered, *fitrah*-aligned, and higher-world intentions.

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168 Al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, vol. 70, page 249, Hadith 24.

Before Any Action: Practice Asking *"Which 'I' Am I Intending From?"*

Both our heart and *nafs* are capable of setting intentions, which means they are both capable of setting the direction of their action or seeking something from their action, and utilizing the mind to serve what they are seeking. Setting an intention is ultimately you identifying what you are desiring and seeking from what you are about to do. So, before we do any action or deed, we must always ask ourselves, "*What am I seeking and which part of me is seeking that thing?*" We have to understand that our being contains different driving forces within it and that "I" is not always in reference to our entire self or the highest part of our self. We have a heart that serves our higher self and a lower self that has its own wants and drives, so there is always this battle within us between intending and choosing from the heart and intending or choosing from the *nafs*. And what we claim, choose, seek, or desire may come from either place. When I was discussing this concept with a mentor of mine, he responded by reframing it into profound questions that always stuck with me. He said, "*Which 'I' are we talking about?... When we say 'I am seeking this or that,' or 'I love this or that,' which 'I' are we referring to?*"

Through the H.O.M.E. Method, I teach that, whenever we are about to do something and we are driven by a certain desire, to *first* ask ourselves "*Is this desire coming from our lower self (or nafs) or our higher self (or ruh)?*" Is this a *nafsi* need or a *ruhi* need? For when we say "I," we are talking about the self, but which self? For we have a lower self and a higher self. For example, you may know on an intellectual level that going to the mosque to pray is a great deed, because that is information you have previously collected, but a sincere intention is not set until the heart firmly accepts, believes, and prioritizes that truth above the desires of the *nafs*. The *nafs*, for instance, might find benefit in going to the mosque to pray. It might desire self-importance, being known to people as someone who goes to the mosque to pray, or maybe food offered at the mosque after prayer. It then becomes a battle between the heart and *nafs*, and in that moment, we have to identify which "I" we want to live from. Do I want to live and act from my higher self, or from this lowly self that won't give me anything in return but further struggle, pain, and long-term stagnation on a spiritual, mental, and emotional level? To choose to live from our higher self is to give the heart what benefits its alignment with the *ruh*, which is choosing to go to the mosque with the intention of *only* seeking God. Even if we originally were going with an intention rooted in the *nafs*, we have an opportunity in any moment to change that intention, even on the way to the mosque, to say, "*No, I want to elevate this intention*," "*I do not want to go to the mosque leading from this ego*," "*I don't want to go in with low-level vibrations*

and energy," "*I want to lead from my heart and vibrate from a higher place.*" "*I want to go seeking God alone.*"

Gain More Victories For Your Heart: Practice Choosing Heart Over Ego

For a moment, let's compare the north pole and south pole of the earth to the higher self (the *ruh*) and lower self (the *nafs*) of our being. Both the north pole and south pole actually have strong magnetic pulls. Similarly, the pull of our higher self is strong, but so is the pull of our lower self. As our higher self pulls the heart towards God and the lofty realm in which it came from, the lower self is also pulling the heart towards its desires and this lower realm (*dunya*) we are passing through. The heart, being like a compass, is in the middle of these two magnetic pulls, and depending on which actions we engage in and the intentions behind those actions, we are always making a choice, higher self or lower self, or our heart over our ego.

We must understand that the actions that are difficult for our *nafs* or our ego are usually good for the heart, which only finds peace when it is aligned with our higher self. We often mesh these two entities of ourselves (our heart and ego) together and this can make things confusing. When we think something doesn't feel right, or we feel heavy inside, we need to ask ourselves, "*Which part of ourselves is heavy? Which part of us is struggling?*" When we say things like, "*I don't feel right about doing such and such,*" which part of you doesn't feel right? Is it your *nafs*? Or is it your heart that seeks to be aligned with your higher self?

When we are trying to do good and sincere actions that feel heavy to do, we must remember that this heaviness is often *not* from the heart. It is from the *nafs* that is throwing a tantrum, just like a child. It seeks attention and refuses to step away from the front lines. But our heart is there, always ready, yearning to be fed. We just have to quiet the fuss the *nafs* is making so we can feel our heart's presence. And the best way to do this is to let the heart start winning small battles where it gets nourished and our ego-containing self does not.

In every moment, and through every action we are about to do, we have the opportunity to choose higher self or lower self, or heart over ego. But we cannot choose both, for no system can ever run smoothly with two leaders, and sincerity cannot exist if we have two destinations. We cannot have two lords and we cannot have two leaders within our being. Attempting to choose both the *nafs* and heart, or attempting to give the same value to both God and something else, only creates great inner conflict. And when we meet God, only deeds rooted in the heart, not the *nafs*, will be accepted. In the higher realm that is real and true, sincerity for the sake of God is the only currency. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) gave us many examples of people who will meet God

saying, "*I did this and that for you*," only to be told by God that they are lying and they did it for the people. For example, a man will come to God and say, "*I studied (religious) knowledge and I taught it and I recited the Qur'an for Your sake.*" God will say: "*You have lied – you studied (religious) knowledge so that it might be said (of you): He is learned. And you recited the Qur'an so that it might be said (of you): He is a reciter.*"[169]

The veil is lifted
The platform is set
My name is called
What will I present?
Deeds of ego or of heart?
I can't speak, but I fear
What the scales will tell.[170]

Our deeds lose value in the eternal world that truly matters, when they are not done in service of the *ruh* that is created to live there forever, and the *ruh* can only thrive there when our actions in this world are for God. As God tells us in the Qur'an: "*It has been revealed to you and to those who lived before you that if you consider other things equal to Allah (God), your deeds will be made devoid of all virtue and you will certainly be lost*" (39:65).

The heart can only have one Lord that it worships and devotes its actions to. And our inner being, this sacred internal world, can only have one leader within, or else we will find ourselves in constant chaos, torn between serving our higher self (the *ruh*) – the most noble and important part of you – and serving your lower self, the *nafs* – this pleasure-seeking, ego-containing part of you. Many times, to make ourselves feel better or to avoid making this difficult yet noble choice of serving our higher self, we let ourselves believe that a sincere deed can be one that is both for our *nafs* and also for our heart. For example, let's say you want to post on social media about a charitable cause you contributed to. This action may be both rooted in an intention of the *nafs* and an intention of the heart. Your *nafs* may desire to show off and gain self-importance, but your heart may also want to share for the intention of encouraging others to give charity. So you may find yourself torn as you decide whether to post about your contribution, and then you may decide to post anyway, fulfilling both intentions of the heart and *nafs*. But once the *nafs* gets a share of our intentions, the heart's intention and nourishment does not become fulfilled at all. Because again, true sincerity is when our heart reaps the full reward of our deeds and the *nafs* (or ego) gets no share. And only then

169 Hadith 6, 40 Hadith Qudsi.

170 Poem by the author.

can sincerity serve its true purpose: to free and liberate our hearts from the shackles of the *nafs*. Only a liberated heart can elevate our souls, and we can't expect to fuel our egos and also have hearts that are free. A free heart comes from saying no to the *nafs*. Therefore, we have to always make a choice. In this case of posting about a charitable cause, if you know your *nafs* will feel good from getting the attention of posting that *you* contributed to the cause, then the sincerest form of posting may include leaving that part out and just posting about the charity without saying *you* contributed to it. That way, you fulfill the heart's sincere intention to encourage others to do good while depriving your *nafs* of fulfilling its desire for self-importance and praise.

It is a constant struggle between our *nafs* and our heart. But do not hate the struggle. Do not let the struggle anger you or discourage you. Without this struggle, there would be no virtue to earn and no victory to embrace. God knows He has put this struggle within us, and because of this struggle, He has allowed us to attain a higher rank than even the angels, who do not know such a battle within them. Be compassionate towards this makeup of yours, and do not let yourself or *Shaytan* make you think that you are permanently flawed or destined to fail.

At the same time, remember that every day, there will be this battle between your heart and ego, and each day, the victory will go to the one you nourished the most and set intentions from the most. Therefore, building the muscle of setting sincere intentions daily is a great place to start letting your heart win some battles against the *nafs*, and in essence to take back its rightful position as leader of your being. So I encourage you to start engaging in the practice of setting as many God-centered and heart-led intentions as you can each day. And you don't have to start big. You can start with the smallest and most mundane act you do each day. Remember that small efforts, steps, and deeds done with *great* love, purpose, meaning, and intention are more powerful and transformative than taking great steps and actions void of purpose, intention, love, and meaning. It is not the size of the action that matters, but what the action is rooted in. If the roots of the action are void of good intentions, meaning, and love, it won't matter how big an action is or even how much attention it receives. It will be an action that ultimately fuels your ego, and not your heart. It will be an action that will make you feel good temporarily, but leave you with no lasting inner nourishment, peace, and freedom.

Do not wait to start this sacred work. Start *today* by training your heart to set an intention for God in everything you do, from the tiniest to largest actions you are about to engage in. Through anything you do, from cooking a meal, to going to work, to going to the gym, to playing with your children, you have an opportunity to direct your "why" to God, to seek value from that action with Him, and to make Him and His pleasure with you your priority

above anything else. Supplications are a great way to do this. Islam equips us with supplications to say for almost every action, from the act of waking up, to the act of sleeping, and everything we do in between. For instance, as we supplicate or say the prophetic (ﷺ) *dua* we are taught to say after waking up, we are remembering God and *Who* we are going to direct that day and all its action towards. Remember it is not about perfection. It is simply about creating more days in which your heart wins more battles than the *nafs*, where you allow your heart to gain more victories than the day before, by increasing in actions that are led by it and are for God. So take it day by day, and remember to ask God daily for His help in this struggle, for we cannot win any battle without Him, external ones or internal ones, and "*...victory comes only from Allah. Surely Allah is Almighty, All-Wise*" (Qur'an, 8:10).

Finally, know that it may feel awkward or uncomfortable in the beginning to start taking the time to set God-centered intentions for small or normal things you do mindlessly every day, but when you get past this awkwardness and discomfort, you will realize that this is exactly what your heart needed all along. And those things you found to be mundane will start to become beautiful and lively actions you are connected to. You start to feel more nourished and enough even through the smallest of deeds because they are now rooted in great intentions. And you will realize that the awkwardness and discomfort you initially experienced was from your *nafs,* and you will be left with the awakening of your heart and soul.

Key Practice Tip

Take some time to set God-centered intentions for *at least* 5 actions that you typically do every day (i.e., driving, going to work, cooking, picking up your kids from school). Direct those actions to God and watch how more present you become with those actions you thought were just ordinary and mundane each day. As every week progresses, try to gradually increase in the amount of actions you set God-centered intentions for. Before you know it, you will not want to engage in actions without being connected to your intentions.

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Living By H.O.M.E.
Implement the Psycho-Spiritual Practice of *Tazkiyah*

Tazkiyah is the practice of removing from the heart that which is harmful or impedes its growth, and is often referred to by the scholars as "the path of self-development," for it is the necessary practice that refines and reforms the entire self. The word *tazkiyah* itself originally means to prune a plant, which is to remove that which is harmful to the plant's growth. When we practice *tazkiyah* of the self, we are removing (or purifying) from our entire self that which is harmful. Doing so requires that we prioritize the purification of the heart, for it is through the purification of the heart, that every other facet within us becomes purified and aligned as well. Therefore *tazkiyah* empowers the heart to lead every other facet in our inner world in the right direction. It makes sense then why purifying our heart (the key focus of the practice of *tazkiyah*) is at the core of what Islam teaches us to do, and is a key goal of a Muslim. And that is because, if the heart is not purified and is left without care and the proper nourishment, the heart cannot lead, and in turn, the soul cannot fulfill the purpose in which it was created.

> "*In Islam, the ultimate objective of religion and shariah (Islamic law) and the real purpose of raising prophets from among mankind was performing and teaching tazkiyah.*"[171] — Amin Ahsan Islahi

Without *tazkiyah*, we cannot rise above the lower self (the *nafs*) and become aligned with our higher self (the *ruh*). To be aligned with the soul, the heart's condition needs to constantly be monitored and cared for. This heart within each of our chests is the most powerful facet within us, but its nature is fragile. This heart is so sensitive, and depending on what we fuel the most within us, it can turn in the wrong direction. If we constantly fuel the *nafs*, the heart has no choice but to turn in the direction of all that which the *nafs* leads it to. But if we engage in the actions that serve the soul and prioritize our Creator, the heart has no choice but to turn in the direction of all that serves our higher self. Through trial and error, we experience the harm, constriction, heaviness, and malnourishment of the heart when it is turned away from all that serves

171 Islahi, A. (2006).

our higher self. And through trial and error, we experience the expansion, alignment, growth, and peace of the heart when it is turned towards all that serves our higher self.

The heart is designed to experience the most beautiful connection with God, and – as you learned so far – is designed to reflect the beautiful values of our higher self (the *ruh*). But as we journey through this world and engage with it in a way that does not properly nourish our heart and serve our higher self, our heart becomes covered by the impact of our lower-self actions. Every time we are led by the *nafs*, the heart flips to face it and begins to reflect its values. The values of our lower self are not in the form of light, but in the form of *black spots* that cover the heart. As Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) has taught us: *"Verily, when the believer commits a sin a black spot appears upon his heart. If he repents and abandons the sin and seeks forgiveness, then his heart will be polished. If he increases in sin, then the blackness is also increased. That is the covering which Allah (God) has mentioned in His Book: No, but on their hearts is a covering because of what they have earned."*[172] Therefore, every time we act in a way that serves our lower self and goes against our higher self, the heart becomes disconnected from God's light and instead becomes covered with the negative impact of our actions – black spots.

Our negative actions (or sins) prevent us from accessing the power and higher capabilities of the heart. They are what blacken the heart's lens and cause it to lose its mirror-like quality that allows it to reflect the light of the *ruh*. Our negative actions create a covering on our heart that impedes its growth, its ability to witness truths, and its ability to connect with its Creator, others, and the world it interacts with. But the heart underneath that covering is still so beautiful and powerful. If we work to purify and clean this lens, essentially engaging in the practice of *tazkiyah*, we can start to experience the beauty and power of our heart again. But without *tazkiyah*, we remain disconnected and cut off from its beauty and power. I prefer this language when discussing the heart, rather than saying "*the heart is diseased, or bad*," which is the language often used when Muslims discuss the purification of the heart. From a psychological point of view, I think it can create a lot of toxic shame, especially for people who already struggle with toxic shame due to being emotionally abused or excessively criticized and shamed, especially in their childhood. And when one thinks of their very heart as "bad," the increased shame that arises from this approach can then become the very barrier that keeps them from healing and purifying their heart. I think it's healthier for people who are working on cultivating a healthier and loving relationship with themselves and more in line

172 *Sunan Ibn Majah*, 4244, referencing Qur'an, 83:14.

with the *hadith* (mentioned above), to say that the heart has barriers upon it rather than it is "bad." It allows us to understand that it's a matter of simply being disconnected from the beauty our heart has to offer us while empowering us to tackle the barriers that keep us from accessing the heart's power.

This goes back to the difference I pointed out earlier, between toxic shame and guilt. Toxic shame is saying "I have a bad heart," while guilt is saying "my actions were bad and have negatively impacted my heart or created a barrier around my heart." But while I do believe this approach is beneficial to people who struggle with excessive shame, I also see the benefit in saying that our psycho-spiritual heart is diseased – only if we approach the psycho-spiritual heart the same way we approach the physical heart when it is diseased. When someone's physical heart is diseased or not functioning in a way that it is supposed to, there is less stigma or shame. A person understands that the disease of their physical heart requires attention, healing, and care. Having awareness of the physical disease motivates the person to engage in the removal of the disease, essentially the *tazkiyah* of the physical heart. A disease in any one of our physical facets (or organs) simply tells us that the organ is not fulfilling its purpose. It is not functioning in the way it was designed. A diagnosis of a physical disease helps us define a treatment approach. But I do understand it's not as simple or stigma- and shame-free as psychological or spiritual diagnosis. People experience more shame receiving a psychological or spiritual diagnosis than a physical diagnosis. This is why, as mentioned earlier, there is a difference of opinion in the psychology field on whether diagnosing is even helpful to clients, due to the different reactions clients have and the shame a diagnosis can trigger in a client. So again, depending on who you are and what you struggle with, you can choose which approach is best for you when it comes to your spiritual health. You can choose to say "my heart is diseased," if it will help you take a proactive and healthy approach to *tazkiyah*, or you can say "my actions have created barriers around my heart," if you feel that produces less toxic shame and will allow you to take a proactive and healthy approach to *tazkiyah*.

But regardless of our approach, we all need *tazkiyah*, because it is the very practice that removes from the heart the negative impact of our actions, purifying the heart, and making it a polished, clear mirror, more able to reflect the light of the *ruh*. We need *tazkiyah*, for it is the very practice that unveils the heart to see truth as truth, and be able to distinguish that truth from what is false. And that is because our ability to witness truth depends on the lens of our heart. The eye of our heart, like our physical eye, has its own lens in which it sees. Any dirt found on the lens of our physical eye will impact our ability to see and hinder our eye from doing what it was designed to do. Similarly,

any "dirt" (or black spots, as indicated in the *hadith* mentioned above) found on the lens of our psycho-spiritual heart impacts the heart's ability to see and prevents the heart from doing what it was designed to do.

Any true leader must constantly engage in a process of purification, a process of polishing themselves so that they can effectively lead. And that is because a true leader has to be able to *see* correctly, for its followers depend on its vision to guide them. The same is true for the heart. The practice of *tazkiyah* is what allows the heart to lead properly, and for the mind and *nafs* to trust its vision. If the mind and *nafs* see that the heart's vision is compromised, they won't be subservient to it, for who would serve or follow a blind leader, and trust it to show the way when they can't see it? If we do not consistently clear our heart's lens – remove what is blocking its vision – it will not be able to do what it is created to do. It will remain veiled, and a heart that is veiled is no use to the rest of our being. The heart was created to lead, not the *nafs* or our mind, and so it needs to be unveiled to guide the flow of the system it exists in. But we can't forget that it is ultimately God who unveils the heart to see truth, and therefore we always need His help and guidance. Therefore, a great habit to build is incorporating the following *dua* in your daily supplications: "*O Allah, show me the truth as truth and guide me to follow it. Show me the false as false and guide me to avoid it.*"[173]

Tazkiyah: The Psycho-Spiritual Process of Removal & Beautification

Tazkiyah is both a psychological and spiritual process, for it serves us, not just spiritually, but also on a mental and emotional level. This psycho-spiritual process of *tazkiyah* is one I have explored for many years, for I was always fascinated with its holistic experience and benefits. Through these explorations, I have learned that *tazkiyah* is essentially centered around two very important core components (or practices), and they are *removal and beautification.*

Tazkiyah is the holistic process that involves *removing* from our heart and our entire being that which is harmful and not in service of our higher self, while *beautifying* our heart and entire being with the actions that *do* serve our higher self. Both removal and beautification need to exist together. As we work to remove from our inner world that which is not aligned with God and not in service of our holistic growth, we also have to work to beautify our inner world as well. We cannot expect to beautify the heart without also prioritizing the removal of its impurities. But as we work to remove the heart's barriers and clutter, we make space for beautification.

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173 *Sharh al-Muntahá al-Irādāt*, 3/497.

Remove Harm

Istighfar – which means "to seek forgiveness" – is one of the most beautiful and powerful forms of *zikr* we are taught through Islam. And it plays a crucial and powerful role in the process of *tazkiyah*, for forgiveness is what *removes* the negative effects of our sins from our heart and from our life – from our internal and external world. Amongst the different forms of "*istighfar*" is the supplication that is called "*sayyidul istighfar*,"[174] the master (or most superior) of *istighfar*, which includes seeking refuge in God from the harm that our actions could cause us. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) said, "*The most superior way of asking for forgiveness from Allah (God) is: 'O Allah (God), You are my Lord. There is no God but You. You created me and I am Your servant, I am committed to You and Your promise, as much as I can. I* ***seek refuge in You from the evil I have done****. I acknowledge Your favors and I acknowledge my sins, so forgive me. Verily, no one forgives sins but You.*" [175]

You see, Islam teaches us that what we do ultimately affects *us*. Our negative actions do not harm God, but rather they harm ourselves. And God does not want us to harm ourselves by engaging in actions that are not valuable and elevated. He values us and, therefore, prescribed the actions that allow us to align with our higher self, so that we walk this path honored, freer, elevated, and noble. *Istighfar* in all its forms allows us to free ourselves from the negative effects and evils of our own actions, starting with the removal of the barriers surrounding our heart that result from them. *Istighfar* unveils the heart, allowing it to see beautifully again.

With every *istighfar*
the walls we built
upon our heart
begin to break and fall
With every *istighfar*,
we free the heart
to respond to God's call.[176]

The Prophet (ﷺ) himself would be sensitive to veils forming upon his heart and would retreat to *istighfar* to protect himself, as he said, "*Sometimes I perceive a veil over my heart, and I supplicate Allah (God) for forgiveness a hundred times in a day.*"[177] He understood how sensitive this heart is to what it witnesses in

174 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, 6306.

175 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, 6306.

176 Poem by the author.

177 *Riyad as-Salihin*, 1869.

the world, and he made sure to care for its purity and sight each day. If this is how the most pure-hearted of mankind (ﷺ) cared for his heart on a daily basis, how can *we* neglect *istighfar* any day of our lives? We need it *every* day, for we need this heart to lead each day. Without *istighfar*, the heart becomes veiled from witnessing God, His closeness, His light, His guidance, and His truths. And a heart disconnected from this cannot lead the mind or *nafs*. In the end, our inner world becomes chaotic and loses its harmony and balance.

Istighfar frees the heart, but this freedom does not just improve our state spiritually, but also psychologically. This is a truth that Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) also taught us: "*If anyone constantly seeks forgiveness (from Allah), Allah (God) will appoint for him a way out of every distress and a relief from every anxiety, and will provide sustenance for him from where he expects not.*"[178] This hadith teaches us that there is a strong link and relationship between *istighfar* and us feeling less distress, less anxiety, and more relief, which are all psycho-spiritual benefits. There is a link between removing the harms or effects of our actions (through *istighfar*) and the reduction of stress and anxiety in our life. This is a link that is not often talked about: the relationship between our sins and our psychological and spiritual health.

The word "sin" has a negative connotation in the psyche of many people. It brings up a lot of shame and judgment that leads people to avoid discussing it or addressing it. But when we break down the word "sin" through an Islamic lens, it is simply any action that hurts our own soul. This is reflected in the following verse, where God says: "*Say: 'O my Servants who have* ***transgressed against their souls****! Despair not of the Mercy of Allah (God): for Allah (God) forgives all sins: for He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful*" (Qur'an, 39:53).

A sin is any action we engage in that does not serve our souls, that goes against what benefits our being. In this verse, God is teaching us that sins are not a transgression against God, for God is not impacted by our actions. Sins are a transgression against ourselves. When we sin, we hurt ourselves. We mistreat ourselves when we engage in any action or behavior that does not serve our higher self and who God wants us to be. A sin is any action that is not aligned with our *fitrah*, purpose, and God. But when we engage in actions that God prescribed for us, when we engage in good deeds – and use our senses, organs, inner tools, and body to do good, be good, and bring good to the world – we do the opposite of transgressing against ourselves. We become a friend to ourselves. We show respect to ourselves. Through our actions, we show that we value ourselves. Our relationship with ourselves becomes sacred, and this in turn benefits us not only spiritually, but also mentally and emotionally as well.

178 *Riyad as-Salihin*, 1873.

But many people want to completely separate our spiritual experience from our psychological well-being, which I find dismissive and not holistic at all. What impacts our psycho-spiritual heart impacts our entire being, and this in turn affects our psychological health. If exercise, nutrition, and increasing healthy behaviors improves our psychological well-being, how can we say that *increasing* behaviors that positively impact our heart and souls, does not affect our psychological well-being? As a society, we are okay with saying, exercise improves anxiety, but not "*istighfar can improve anxiety.*" Now if someone said, "*exercise alone improves anxiety,*" I would be skeptical, just as I would be skeptical if someone said, "*don't go to therapy or work on your mental and emotional growth, and just do istighfar.*" I have a problem with people giving black-and-white and absolute advice when it comes to psychological wellness. We wouldn't tell a person with cancer or a physical challenge to just do "*istighfar.*" We will say, "*istighfar is a great practice to engage in through any challenge in life, but make sure you are going to the doctor and following your treatment protocol.*" God wants us to take all the means to healing, to be proactive in engaging in the work that will lead to the results that we want Him to give us. After all, did the wife of Prophet Ibrahim, Hajer, just pray for water, or did she run seven times between the mountains of *Safa* and *Marwa* putting all her effort looking for water? She prayed but she also put in all her effort to search for what she is seeking, and in the end, God did not just reward her with water, He gave her access to the best source of streaming water to ever exist on the face of the earth. God helps those who help themselves.

Istighfar is a great practice to engage in every day of our lives, and especially when we are going through struggles on any level. It holds for us great psycho-spiritual power, in that it lightens what we are carrying internally. You see, every action we engage in that goes against our *fitrah* – everything we see or hear that disturbs our heart and soul – produces an inner weight, an internal clutter, that we carry within until we acknowledge it, let go of it, and ask forgiveness for it. *Istighfar* plays a role in our mental, emotional, and spiritual relief because it allows us to free ourselves from that which is taking space within our being, not leaving any room for beautification. We understand this in terms of external physical clutter. We even say, "*a cluttered space is a cluttered mind*" to emphasize the link between clutter in our homes and a mind that is not clear, centered, and focused. When our homes and spaces are cluttered, we can't think straight. We feel heavier internally. And there is no way we can begin to beautify our space while being surrounded with such clutter. Because removal and cleaning precedes beautification and decoration. You wouldn't add the most beautiful furniture to your living room without first cleaning it and removing old clutter, would you? No, of course

not, we would clean our living room, remove old furniture and clutter, so that we can make room for the new furniture. Cleaning the space makes room for the beauty we want to add into it.

We know that the heart's light, beauty, purity, and wellness impacts the rest of our being. So if we want the rest of our being to be filled with light, beauty, relief, peace, alignment, we have to fill our hearts with those things as well. But for the heart to be beautified and filled with these qualities, we have to first make room for the beauty we want to add into it.

We build homes
in our minds
for our worries
but we forget
to build homes
in our hearts
for the One
who removes
all worries.[179]

We have to make room in our heart for all that we want to receive from God. We have to declutter this heart and prepare it to receive the blessings we so deeply long for. We want to make room for it to receive the great blessings of love and mercy. We want to make room within it to be decorated by the sweetness of faith, as the Prophet (ﷺ) himself would ask God in the following supplication (or *dua*): "*O Allah (God), make faith beloved to us and beautify it in our hearts (or decorate our hearts with it), ...*"[180]

We want a heart that is constantly purified, decluttered, cleaned and ready to receive the decorations that faith (*iman*) brings. These decorations of the heart include the light of truthfulness (*sidq*), certainty of God's truths (*yaqeen*), trust in God (*tawakul*), contentment with God and His plan for us (*rida*), and the most beautiful form of surrendering (*Tasleem*). When the heart is decorated with such treasures, it becomes easier for the *nafs* and mind to be subservient. As a result, our worries and fears start to calm as well, as this heart contains greater treasures that allow it to confidently lead the way. This is the psycho-spiritual power of *istighfar*, and why it is an essential part of the removal process within *tazkiyah*. Through *istighfar*, we learn how important it is to consistently remove and clean our inner home as we would clean our outer homes daily.

In addition to *istighfar*, the removal stage of *tazkiyah* requires that we also actively engage in efforts to free ourselves from all that harms us. It includes

179 Poem by the author.

180 *Al-Adab Al-Mufrad*, 699 (Sahīh al-Albani).

a serious attempt to stop engaging in the actions that only serve the *nafs* and not our heart and soul. It includes the process of unlearning what no longer serves us: the thoughts, beliefs, and values we have been living by for so long. *Tazkiyah* is a psycho-spiritual process, because it forces us to assess how we think and view ourselves, God, and others, and transform those thoughts and views to elevate our cognition to a higher level that is not led by our lower self and its desires or grievances. I believe therapy can greatly aid the process of *tazkiyah*, for the right therapeutic journey facilitates a process where people can identify their core beliefs, values, and thoughts, and how they guide their actions and views of themselves, God, others, and their path in this world. The more we assess all the pieces we carry, the more we realize what pieces we carry are false and not aligned with our higher self. We can then make a decision to no longer carry those pieces, remove them from our heart and inner world, and choose to replace them with greater high-value and truthful pieces that are in line with our higher self and its Destination.

Beautify as You Remove

As we remove what no longer serves us, we have to simultaneously increase what does. This is the beautification component. We can't remove from our life that which we were attached to *without* simultaneously putting in the effort to attach ourselves to something far more beautiful. I learned this truth from my work in addiction and drug abuse. Clients who successfully were able to stay sober were the clients who prioritized beautifying their life *as* they attempted to remove from their life the substance or drug they were addicted to.

Removal alone often does not work. We cannot remove something from our life and leave that place empty. For example, if you remove your couch from your living room, and do not have a better couch to replace it with, you will most likely try to retrieve your old couch. The empty space in your living room will keep you fixated on what was once there, what you are familiar with. Another example is when someone is trying to disconnect from bad friends or environments. If they disconnect from those friends and places, but then find themselves in extreme isolation or without better environments to be in, they are likely to return to those old friends and places. As human beings, it is much easier to return to what is familiar than to search for something new or seek something better. The clients who had greater strength to stay sober were actively engaging in *adding* to their life what they love more, and increasing in the behaviors that made them feel better than drugs ever did. It is the same in the process of *tazkiyah*, and the transformation of our inner world and the outward behaviors produced by that transformation.

We can't transform through just removing what no longer serves us. We need to be working to beautify and add to our life what is greater and more valuable. So, removal requires beautification, and beautification requires removal. As we do *istighfar*, and actively detach from what doesn't serve us, we need to attach to what does. We need to increase the holistic actions that serve our entire being. This is not limited to just increasing our acts of worship. We need to also increase in everything that supports the growth of our entire being and our elevation to living from our higher self.

Tazkiyah essentially requires us to consistently deprive our lower self (*nafs* or ego) from what it is leading us to do (the removal component), while striving to *increase* what our higher self is calling us to do more of (the beautification component). Therefore the removal component of *tazkiyah* is essentially about saying no to our *nafs*, and the beautification component is essentially about saying yes to all that our heart needs to align with our higher self.

Nafs-Work: Set Boundaries With Your Nafs

Tazkiyah requires that we learn to place boundaries with our *nafs*. In our world today, we often talk about boundaries with others, but rarely talk about boundaries with ourselves. A common self-help concept that is constantly being talked about these days is the power of saying no. But oftentimes, it is in the context of placing boundaries with others. What we often miss is that the greatest no we can actually say is first and foremost to our *nafs*, our lower self, that is always inciting us to do things and act in a way that does not serve our higher self and our path towards God. In fact, it takes more strength and courage to control ourselves than it is to control or set boundaries with others. It is easy to go outward and try to change that which is outside of you. The hardest part is going inward and putting your own *nafs* in its place.

Today, many people are attempting to be freer by excessively trying to control their environment or what is outside of them. They think immediately cutting off someone who agitates them, or isolating themselves will give them freedom, not realizing that oftentimes they imprison themselves because they are led by the *nafs* and its commands. As we are busy focusing on the outward, we miss all the inward ways we can experience greater peace, liberation, and strength. When we can control our *nafs* and what is inward, we can rise above anything that is outward.

When we say no to our *nafs* and its constant desire for instant gratification, its desire to have certainty immediately in a difficult situation, or its need to be the center of attention or superior in an argument, we actually are freeing the heart from its power. In that process, we become lighter and freer. The key, as we navigate our path to God each day, is to pay attention to when our

ego (*nafs*) is trying to come to the surface and prevent the heart from leading. For instance, one of the ways we can help the heart lead is by sincerely seeking knowledge, but sometimes the *nafs* prevents the heart from doing so, and creates a great barrier that keeps many people from benefiting from knowledge they gain. An example of this is when we immediately express "*I already know this*," or "*I already did this*," when we are learning from others or listening to others. Doing so serves the ego's need to preserve our self-importance by proving what we already know or accomplished. It doesn't want to feel less-than as we learn and take an honest look at ourselves on our journey to growth. But sincerely walking the path to transformation requires that we humble the ego so the heart can be fully present to connect and benefit from the knowledge it's gaining. The sincere seeker of truth and transformation knows that it doesn't matter what we know, how many times we learned it, or how much we already worked on ourselves. Rather, we become more concerned with how *present* our heart can be with the journey of learning so we walk away changed by any knowledge (new or old) that we connect with. When we value this truth deeply, we don't feel the need to always show or state what we already know, even if it is the hundredth time we are learning it.

One of the greatest lessons I learned in my own journey – and also one I emphasize continuously with my students – is that when we learn from our hearts, it won't matter how many times we learn something. We will always walk away with something new, with a heart that benefited from that knowledge. The second we allow ourselves to be led by our ego and its expression of, "*I learned this before*," we become influenced to view that knowledge as something that has nothing to offer us, and as a result, the heart closes up and becomes deprived of the opportunity to connect to that knowledge we are gaining. After all, we already "know" it. You see, the heart longs to connect, but it has to feel that what we are about to connect it to is something beneficial for it. And the beautiful thing about knowledge is that it always has some truth to offer you every time you connect with it and in every phase of life. You can learn something yesterday on one level and have a whole different perspective learning it today. This truth applies most importantly to the Qur'an. If we go to the Qur'an with our mind or ego, we will immediately think "*I already know the tafsir (meaning) of this or read this before.*" But when we go with our heart, we will always be looking to benefit each time, and God will give our heart something beautiful every time. He will decorate our heart a little bit more with every reading. He allows us to be changed by His words every time.

So let us practice *tazkiyah* and setting boundaries with our *nafs*, when we go to the Qur'an, seek knowledge, or as we listen and learn from others. Let us open our hearts to receive without rushing to express that we already know something. And watch how your heart becomes more present with every verse

you read and every piece of knowledge you gain. That is because humbleness and vulnerability are the key ingredients in the practice of *tazkiyah*. Without them, we will be deprived of the transformation we want to see within us and outside of us. I saw a great example of this humility and vulnerability at a *tazkiyah* retreat I attended with Shaykh Mokhtar Maghraoui. Each day, he would want students to share their reflections about what we were learning. I remember seeing Shaykh Mokhtar sitting in silence with his eyes closed, and his posture ever so present, as every student shared their reflections. Here he was – more knowledgeable than all of us – yet listening with so much presence and focus. I was in awe of his stillness and humility. Above all, this taught me the power of the heart and its great depth. The heart is like an ocean, so vast and deep, and its capacity to receive knowledge is never-ending, as long as we do not let our egos come in the way.

By saying no to our *nafs* when it is pushing us to assert our self-importance, speak ill of someone, or try to show we are superior in knowledge, we elevate ourselves so powerfully in those moments. We also have to be aware that *Shaytan* is always directly speaking to this lower facet within us. So, as we learn to say no to it, and remove things from our life that are driven by it, we not only become stronger against Shaytan, but we are also simultaneously liberating our hearts, which is the goal and essence of *tazkiyah*: internal freedom. We are freeing our hearts from the shackles of the *nafs* – from the veils and coverings imposed on the heart by the pleasure and comfort-seeking part of us. The *nafs* is not concerned with truth. Its primary goal is to ensure our security and comfort as human beings, whereas the heart seeks truth and wants to ensure the soul's comfort. And since we are spiritual beings in essence, our soul's comfort should take priority over our human or worldly comfort. Remember, we are spiritual beings having a human experience, not human beings having a spiritual experience. Every time we prioritize our humanness and the desires of our ego or *nafs* over our soul and its well-being, we are oppressing our heart, which is the opposite of freeing it. And a key aspect of liberating our hearts, is to consistently evaluate what we expose our minds to through our senses – due to the influences of our *nafs* – and how that exposure influences our actions.

Tazkiyah is a Holistic Journey

Tazkiyah is the process in which we are monitoring the turning and facing of our hearts and how our holistic engagement with God, ourselves, and our world, impacts its direction. This requires that we assess all the factors – spiritual, physical, social, environmental – that impact its direction. So, *Tazkiyah* is essentially a holistic practice that requires that we monitor all that we engage with, all that we consume from our world (through what we allow our senses to collect or our body to consume), all that we output into the

world (through our actions), but also the environments we choose to surround ourselves with. Each one of these factors influence which way our heart faces: towards our lower self or our higher self.

For example, one crucial factor that impacts the direction of our hearts is what we eat and how much we feed our bodies. This plays a key role in our *tazkiyah*. Our body's nourishment and the food we consume impact our body, and the wellness of our body impacts our soul. Everything is connected. One area in our being impacts the rest. The nourishment of our body is not separate from the nourishment of our heart and the well-being of our soul. Today, there is a wealth of research on the relationship between diet and mental health, and how certain foods and the struggle of obesity can influence or exacerbate many mental and emotional struggles. Eating that which is unhealthy or eating more than what suffices us hurts us holistically, particularly on a spiritual level. This is why depriving our *nafs* of the excessive food it pushes us to consume is an essential part of *tazkiyah*. In fact, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) emphasized the importance of balance in what we consume, as he said, "*The son of Adam cannot fill a vessel worse than his stomach, as it is enough for him to take a few bites to straighten his back. If he cannot do it, then he may fill it with a third of his food, a third of his drink, and a third of his breath.*"[181]

Another crucial factor that impacts our *tazkiyah* is what we surround ourselves with. Our environments, the people we choose to surround ourselves with, and the experiences we have the capacity to choose all impact the purification of our entire self. Our environment and the people around us have a crucial way of impacting us and influencing the life and choices we make. As Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) said: "*A man follows the religion of his friend; so each one should consider whom he makes his friend.*"[182]

The older I get,
the more I learn
that God-centered
love for others
doesn't always mean
I *stay*.
Loving for His sake
can also mean
that I *walk away*.
If for His sake
I learn to greet
then for His sake
I can learn
to move my feet.[183]

Choosing wholesome environments, wholesome people, and surrounding ourselves with what is nourishing and good for our hearts and souls is essential

181 *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 2380 (Sahīh Ibn Muflih).

182 *Sunan Abi Dawud*, 4833 (Hasan al-Albani).

183 Poem by the author.

for the beautification of our heart. This doesn't mean we will always control our environment. And there will be times when we can't always choose what happens in our environment, or we can't immediately cut off people or escape our surroundings, but to a certain capacity, God gave us the ability to make choices about where we go, who we surround ourselves with, and what we do, and those choices can increase the beautification of our heart.

Through *tazkiyah*, we work to remove that which is harmful, while increasing all the beautiful actions that can support the beautification of the heart. We work to increase the acts of worship prescribed for us on our journey in this world (*zikr*, prayer, the Qur'an) that will purify our hearts, as well as the good words, good things to listen to, good places to be in, good food (and not excessive food), and good people (righteous company), that will also support the comprehensive process and experience of *tazkiyah*. And we can intend all these actions for God, making them all acts of worship.

So you see, in the process of *tazkiyah*, it is never one thing. It is a holistic, interconnected, and psycho-spiritual process that requires both removal and beautification. It is not just heart-work, but also mind-work, *nafs*-work, and behavioral work together.

Key Practice Tips

1. To increase your *ikhlaas* (sincerity), commit to doing a good deed each day that *only* God knows about. This is one of the most powerful ways to not only purify our hearts, but to increase in *taqwa*, inner peace, and closeness to God. Remember, there is so much power in not giving our *nafs* a share of our deeds! But to experience that power, you have to go ahead and apply this practice.
2. Take some time to reflect on what your *nafs*'s greatest unhealthy attachments are that interfere with your spiritual growth and your heart's purification. Remember, as you learned in this chapter, the process of *tazkiyah* involves both removal and beautification. So, for every one of your unhealthy attachments that you identify, be sure to also identify how you will beautify your heart as you deprive your *nafs*. Essentially, you are identifying what you will add to your life in place of what you removed, but this time, you are adding something that serves your heart's alignment with your higher self, not the fuel of your lower self.

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Living By H.O.M.E.
Let Your Mind Serve Your Heart & It Will Serve You

Second to the heart, the mind (or brain) is one of the most fascinating and powerful inner tools God gave us. It is part of our training as psychologists to understand the mind and how it functions on not only a psychological but a physiological level, for its physiology impacts our mental, emotional, and behavioral experience. The mind and its design would constantly leave me in awe and with my belief strengthened that none other but God can create such a tool. The brain is a tool that, if we learned to navigate it in a way that it is designed, would serve our growth and peace exponentially. But if we do not truly understand it and learn how to navigate it accordingly, it will contribute to great inner suffering and in turn to great instability and dysfunction in our emotions and behaviors.

Through the H.O.M.E. Method, I emphasize that the mind's role and position within the psycho-spiritual system is to be the servant of the heart. And if we use the mind to serve any other entity within our psycho-spiritual system, such as the *nafs*, we will suffer great struggle and misalignment. We can either use the mind and all its processes to serve the growth of our *nafs* or to serve the growth of our heart. For example, we can use knowledge in our brain to support the desires of our *nafs* if we wanted to. If the *nafs* is the lead of our being, then we will prioritize feeling good, and will even try to use information we have in the brain to support the opinions and choices that make us feel good, not necessarily the truth or choices that can contribute to our growth. In psychology, we call this cognitive phenomenon *confirmation bias*, which is the tendency or inclination to seek, recall, or cherry-pick information that supports one's previous or already-existing beliefs and values. Many times, we never even assess what our beliefs and values are, yet alone assess how much those beliefs and values were influenced by lower self (*nafs*) or whether they serve our higher self (the *ruh*). It is important to understand that our core beliefs and values shape the choices we make every day, but contrary to Western Psychology, the H.O.M.E. Method views core beliefs and values to be not just a product of the mind, but also the heart. Just like intentions, the H.O.M.E. Method identifies the formation of core beliefs and values to start in the mind, but be set in the

heart (which you will learn more about in a later chapter). The heart is where beliefs and truths go to settle. The mind is where they start and form, but what is in the mind must then go to the heart for deeper processing. The problem is, if we are leading from the *nafs*, we won't let our thoughts, interpretations, core beliefs, and values ever be processed by the heart.

But this is the power of an Islamic psychological approach to our inner work. With the heart as a priority, we understand that what the mind (or lower *aql*) collects, processes, forms, interprets, understands, and stores must also pass through the higher *aql*, the greater tool of truth to process, interpret, and understand on a higher level. This is what it means for the mind to serve the heart. The mind (or brain) understands that it does not have the final say or authority on what is true.

Train Your Mind To Be the Servant & Not the Lead

Now that we understand that our mind is designed to be the servant, and *not* our lead, we have to live according to that belief. This requires that we engage with our mind in a way that serves the nourishment and leadership of the heart.

Cultivate A Strong Mindset So You Can Have a Strong Heartset

When we set the mind in the right direction, the heart also becomes set in the right direction (and vice versa). In the self-help world, there is a wealth of information on how to cultivate a strong mindset. There is an understanding that the mind needs to be set in the right direction daily. But what is often missing from this conversation is how that impacts the heart. When we take the time to work on our minds, its health, what it is exposed to, what it collects from the world, what it thinks about, what it seeks, what it notices, and how it interprets our experiences, the heart is more able to also be set in the direction of what serves it. The types of mindsets that support a strong heartset are: *a positive mindset, an abundant mindset, a grateful mindset, an intentional mindset, a present mindset, and a meaning-centered mindset,* which are mindsets you have been learning to cultivate so far throughout this book and will continue to do so in the coming chapters.

Mind-Work: Pay Attention to How You Utilize Your Senses

Watching over our senses and how we utilize them is necessary for the psycho-spiritual practice of *tazkiyah* and is an essential starting point to cultivating a strong mindset and treating our mind as the servant of the heart.

Our five senses are the portals in which we interact with the world around us, and the portals in which we collect information from the world. Through our sense of sight, touch, smell, taste, and hearing, we are constantly gathering information and that information is instantaneously being sent to the brain for processing. Each sense we have is a function of a specific organ God gave us – whether that be our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, or skin. To perform any action, deed, or behavior, we have to utilize our senses and its corresponding body part (or organ). If we curse at someone, we use our tongue. If we listen to music that promotes self-worship or degrades and objectifies women, we use our ears. If we watch something obscene, we use our eyes. To commit any sin, we have to use our senses, and in turn every sin our senses engage in builds a layer upon the heart, and multiple sins create a thicker covering on the heart. The second we utilize any of our senses, the organ associated with the sense we are using, instantaneously sends that information as a message to a specific part of the brain. For example, visual information collected through the sense of sight by the eyes is immediately sent to our occipital lobe in our brain for processing.

The brain is the most organized machine there is. It has specific areas for specific functions and when a brain is healthy, everything is collected, processed, and organized in the most efficient way. And it executes all its responsibilities whether we like it or not. The brain and all our other organs submit to God, and they obey Him dutifully in fulfilling the role they were given. The brain was designed to collect, process, interpret, store, and help us make sense of the information we collect, and there is no *off* button for its functions. But what we *do* have the power to decide is what we expose our senses to. And while to a certain degree we do not have the power to control everything our senses are exposed to (for example, when we are exposed to situations or trauma beyond our control), to a *great* degree we still have the power to choose what our eyes see, what our ears hear, what our tongue tastes, what our skin touches, and what our nose smells. Beyond that, once we make the choice to utilize any of our senses in a certain way, the brain takes it from there. It has a job to do now with that information.

Depending on what we absorb through our senses, the brain will either have information that serves the heart and our higher self, or it will have information that serves the lower self (*nafs*) and its inflation. The heart can only be nourished by the right information. If we spend our day looking at soul depreciating content, listening to lyrics that are degrading, or surrounding ourselves with people who don't align with our values and therefore speak to us about things that do not serve our growth, the heart is left deeply malnourished. The mind did not serve it with the right information that can settle as beautiful

knowledge within it, and the action we engaged in using our senses will now also negatively impact our heart and being, so it is a circular process, where everything impacts each other.

This is what Islam beautifully highlights – the interconnectedness between our inner world and how we express our inner world through our actions. When we deeply understand that the mind is the servant of the heart, and we prioritize the practice of *tazkiyah* in our lives, we will be sensitive to how we utilize our senses, what we collect with our brain, and the actions we engage in – for we will be deeply connected to how it all impacts the condition of our heart and its ability to lead and benefit our entire being.

Free Your Mind From Rigid Definitions & Expectations

Our mind often creates a prison for our heart, which keeps it from leading our inner world beautifully. When our mind is fixated on the rigid definitions of what our life should look like – such as "*I am supposed to have children by now*" or "*I should have a certain career by now*" or "*my life should look like this,*" – we make it difficult for our heart to be open to what our life actually *is*, and the beauty God has already created for us in the present. Our *nafs* plays a role in bullying the mind to keep these rigid expectations, because our *nafs* (this ego-containing self) is disturbed when the image it presents outwardly doesn't match society's expectations of it. But when the heart is the lead, God's expectations and plan become more important than what people expect of us. And when the heart is led by a great trust in God and His plan, the *nafs* loosens its grip on the mind, and the mind can become more flexible with the image it is creating for our life. Once the mind can break open the rigidly defined boxes it created, it frees our heart to accept the path that God has created, and most importantly, to be present with it. Remember, your life may not look like the way you expected, but it is the life and path your Creator chose for you. He is molding you for what is greater and knows what you need to become the person you are meant to be. Let this truth settle deeply into your heart.

Do Not Believe Every Thought

Through the H.O.M.E. Method, I teach that *every thought we have is real, but it is not necessarily true.* Just this concept alone has helped many of my clients who struggle with anxiety and OCD. Many people who struggle with anxiety and OCD are stuck in a loop of believing everything their brain brings back to them. They have a tendency to define every thought, fear, or worry to be not only real but true. Through the H.O.M.E. Method, I teach that the mind is not your authority, not your lord, and it does not have the final say on

what happens to you in the next moment and near or far future. You have the power to assess what is true by engaging your heart in the process and sending your thoughts to your heart for more truthful processing.

Whenever a disturbing intrusive thought enters your mind and presents to you a horrible idea about yourself or God Himself, or you start catastrophizing and thinking of all the bad things that can happen tomorrow, or you start engaging in negative thoughts about how people view you, such as, "this person hates me, " or "I am not lovable," it is time to remember that your mind is not what has the final say on what is true, and its time to not give it so much power to tell your story. In these moments, I encourage you to tell yourself, *"Just because I am having these thoughts, does not mean they actually are a reflection of what is actually true about me, God, or others."* It is time to access your heart, and connect to what is actually true in your life based on your actions or the actions of others and what is actually happening, not based on what your thoughts, and the feelings those thoughts are producing in that moment. This is a great time to connect to the Qur'an and remember what God has actually said is true, for as you root yourself in His truths, the heart becomes stronger at leading the mind away from anything that does not align with His truths.

Give Your Mind a Rest Through Humility, Prayer, & *Sujood*

Another great way to not give your mind so much power (where you believe its every thought) is to humble it in front of God – physically. In *sujood*, our five daily prayers, we are shown exactly what to do with our mind, which is to humble it, submit it, and not let it rise above our hearts. When the mind starts to overwhelm us, burden us, create excessive fears and worries that keep us stuck and unable to function effectively, it is time to remember its purpose, which is not to lead, but to serve.

When I work with clients who struggle with anxiety and OCD, the concepts of not leading from the mind and humbling the mind become particularly important. A person who struggles with OCD often experiences great self-doubt. They doubt what is true and false about themselves, their thoughts, their worth, their actions. They start to question whether they did an action or not, or whether something is fully clean or not, or obsess over whether what they said or did reflects well on them or not. It is a disorder of great inner doubt. People who struggle with OCD place a tremendous amount of pressure on their brain to figure out everything, to know for certain whether something is clean or not, or know for certain whether what they think is true or not. It is a disorder that is centered around an immense and immediate need for certainty in every moment of doubt and fear. A big part of my work with

Muslim clients who struggle with OCD, in addition to utilizing Exposure and Response Prevention Therapy (ERP), is helping them not give so much power to their brain. I work to help them gradually release themselves from the immense responsibility they have given their mind to do what God can only do, which is have full certainty and knowledge of everything. And this can only be done by humbling the mind and accessing the greater intelligence of the heart.

Today, many people treat their minds as their God. They are essentially *devoted* to everything their mind presents to them. As a result, many people are suffering mentally and emotionally because they refuse to humble the mind, to surrender the mind during times of uncertainty, confusion, and difficulty. And they experience great inner distress due to the immense and unbearable responsibility they place on their mind to know everything and to be certain in every moment. And this is because our mind was not created to burden the responsibility of being our god, for it is a creation, not the Creator.

This is why a powerful practice to cultivate when one is anxious or distressed due to uncertainty they face in life, is to pray. There is great power in getting up when anxious and praying two *rakat* (cycles) in which one bows and prostrates to God, humbling the mind, and remembering that we may not have all the answers, but we have access to the One who does. The Prophet (ﷺ) himself, when he would be distressed, would tell Bilal (رضي الله عنه), the assigned *mu'azzin* (caller to prayer), "*O Bilal, call iqamah for prayer: give us comfort by it.*"[184]

Prayer, especially the *sujood* portion of prayer, is where we send the – physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional – message to our being, that this mind is not the lead of our inner world, and it is not our God. So I encourage you to increase in prayer, and elongate your *sujood*, especially during your most difficult times. Let it be a haven for not just your heart and soul, but also your mind, a place it can go to release the burden it is carrying to figure everything out. For in every *sujood*, as we humble our mind before God – especially the frontal part of the brain that is responsible for many of the advanced processes that contribute to our anxieties (i.e, planning, decision making, etc) – we are sending the message to our being that "this mind is powerful but not so powerful that it should become my lord or the lead within me." In those moments you are freeing yourself from being a prisoner of your mind.

Through humility, prayer, and *sujood*, you are also sending yourself the message that, *"it is okay to not have certainty in every moment, know everything, or even have a plan for everything,"* for God *knows*, and He will reveal to us what we need to know *when* we need to know it. This concept is really important

184 *Sunan Abi Dawud*, 4985 (Sahīh al-Albani).

for anyone who struggles with being burdened by their mind and the excessive worries and fears it creates in their life. For instance, when I work with someone who struggles with anxiety, a big part of my work is helping them sit with the discomfort, fear, and agitation of uncertainty. For many people, even the concept of, "*It is okay that I don't have certainty right now,*" can be quite foreign and so new to their thought process. Many times, people will often think that the way out of their anxiety is by relentlessly trying to fix a problem, gain certainty, immediately attempting to escape their emotional agitation, or escaping the fear by any means. But the door to relieving or reducing anxiety is not by going away from the fear, but rather by going *through* the fear. It is not by necessarily finding an immediate solution, but rather cultivating the inner courage, strength, and muscle of sitting with fear and discomfort, and not placing greater pressure on oneself and one's mind to immediately remove it. This pressure we place on ourselves to always have the answers is what adds even greater distress to the typical anxiety we may face in reaction to a situation.

When we can sit with ourselves and all our discomfort and anxiety and tell ourselves, "*I don't have all the answers now, and that is okay,*" "*I do not have certainty about my future, but God does, and in time, He will show me what I need to know,*" "*I am not designed to be the Lord of myself,*" or "*I am safe right now, even if my mind is telling me I'm not,*" we give ourselves a chance to reduce our anxiety rather than increasing it by trying to escape the discomfort. This, compiled with deep breathing exercises, being present in the moment, prayer, and holistic self-care, one will feel themselves becoming stronger internally as they learn to control that which is within, rather than that which is outside of them.

We have to remember that we won't always have certainty about whether something is true or not, a solution to every problem we face, an immediate answer to every prayer, or knowledge about what our future holds. And in this intellect-worshiping world, we put so much pressure on our minds to know and figure everything out, and this pressure often comes from the *nafs*. When we don't do the work on our heart, and ensure that the position of leadership is given to it and not to any other entity within us, our anxieties and distresses in life will only be worsened and exacerbated. This is because the *nafs* does not like *not* knowing or having certainty, and basically anything that threatens its comfort or security, and when it finds itself in that position, it starts to bully the mind. This leads to increased mental rumination, anxiety, and distress, for the mind won't always have access to the information the *nafs* needs inorder to be soothed. And this is because when the mind comes back to the *nafs* with no new or immediate answers for a problem or discomfort it is facing, the *nafs* bullies the mind to *think again and again*. It is like a child that keeps

nagging its parent to immediately replace a broken toy or give them something they want. The *nafs*, being like a child, throws a tantrum and begins nagging the mind to find a way to get it what it wants. As a result, like a parent, the mind becomes worn out. The mind becomes overworked. This plays a role in people's difficulty functioning throughout the day and even getting a good night's sleep. This is what happens when we give the mind the position of leadership that it wasn't designed for. We look to it as the "all knowing," when only God is the All Knowing.

One of God's beautiful names is *Al-Aleem*, the All-Knowing. Throughout the Qur'an, God comforts us with the fact and truth that He has all knowledge. He knows what is seen and unseen, what is visible and invisible, what is hidden and what is apparent. He sees what we do not see, and knows what we do not know. God tells us in the Qur'an, "*And with Him are the keys of the unseen; none knows them except Him. And He knows what is on the land and in the sea. Not a leaf falls but that He knows it*" (6:59). God reminds us of this truth because our path in this world is full of many uncertainties.

If we lead from our *nafs* or mind, we neglect the access we have to God, His knowledge, and what we *need* to thrive and truly navigate times of uncertainty. We cut ourselves off from the greatest haven we can have in the midst of our storms. But when we lead from the heart and we turn it in the direction of the *ruh* (our higher self) – and not the *nafs* (our lower self)– it begins to reflect greater truths that illuminate our mind and being. It is able to access what the *ruh* already knows on an innate level, and that is *only* God knows everything. The heart, when in its rightful leadership position, surrenders to God and His knowledge. It accepts what the *nafs* cannot accept, and that is: we do not *have* to know everything, nor were we designed to. So, what happens is, the heart's leadership essentially sends a clear message to the *nafs* to back off and stop bullying the mind. In this process, we become gentler with the mind. The mind no longer has to overwork itself, and as a result, finds greater rest and peace.

Thought Trains: *Train* Your Thoughts

One of the techniques I use to remind my clients the power they have of choosing their thoughts and not letting their thoughts crash into them or lead them, is getting them to think of their thoughts as trains. This is helpful for people who struggle with rumination and intrusive thoughts and have a hard time realizing the power they have to be led or not led by a thought. I start by telling my client to envision themselves standing at a train station and that they start to hear the sounds of the train that is approaching. As the train gets closer to them, the sound gets louder and louder until it arrives and makes a full stop. I then tell them that at this moment, they have a choice, and I ask them

what choice they have at this moment. Of course, the client usually says they can choose to hop on the train or not get on the train and let the train leave without them. I then tell them that many of our thoughts are like this train. We can know when they are forming and when they are fast approaching. As they come closer to the forefront of our mind, their noise becomes louder and louder just like the noise of the train. When we are not accustomed to doing inner work, many people won't recognize the unwanted, unhelpful, intrusive, or negative thought until it becomes so loud and right in front of them, taking up so much space. But even then, we can choose to disengage – it just might be harder. The train station is like the brain, and thoughts are like trains constantly passing through. We can of course choose not to hop on the train when it is so big and right in front of us, but it might be harder and we might succumb to the pressure of just taking the wrong train to avoid waiting, even though it is a longer and more difficult route, but it gives us the illusion of immediately easing the discomfort we feel. But we don't always have to wait for the train to be right in front of us to make a decision whether we will hop on or not. If we know a train is coming and that is *not* our train, we can also decide to leave the station or go wait somewhere else until the right train comes. We don't have to wait until the train is so close and the sound is louder than ever.

The more we do this inner work, the more we become aware when a negative, unwanted, or unhelpful thought first arises, and we will get better at redirecting it more effectively or choosing not to engage. But for many people who struggle with intrusive thoughts that highly trigger their anxiety and fear, it often feels like the thought is suddenly like a train that instantaneously appeared so close to them with no warning or signs that it is approaching. In this situation, it becomes harder to avoid hopping on the train, but with work and practice, one can build the muscle of choosing to leave the station and go somewhere else where they are not consumed with the thought. In those moments, it is about disconnecting from the mind and resting in the heart, so we are not burdened or defeated by our thoughts.

The heart is always available to us as a resting place. We don't need to always be in our minds. The mind is not our home. The heart is. The heart is the place of the greatest safety and belonging within us. It is the place that doesn't need an immediate answer for every problem like the *nafs*. It is the place within us that allows us to just be, to just be present with the reality in front of us, and not be overtaken by the illusions of what could be, all the false scenarios our *nafs* tells us will happen due to the discomfort, fear, and anxiety we feel.

View Your Mind as the Ocean & Your Heart as the Lighthouse

The heart is like the lighthouse of our being, where we go to rest from the unrelenting waves of our thoughts. We are not escaping the brain, but just taking a moment to recalibrate, recharge, reassess, and use the light within the heart to see the brain (and what it is presenting) more accurately, just as the lighthouse allows us to see the ocean and its waves more clearly from afar. The heart is there as a haven for us to recenter ourselves and ground ourselves in greater intelligence and truth that can help us rise above the bullying of the *nafs* and allow us to more accurately see the thoughts we are having for what they are: just thoughts.

When we are taking rest in the heart, we then use this great tool of connection to access the Source of all truth, *Al-Haqq* Himself. We turn this heart to the One who has made the heart such a beautiful haven within our being and we begin strengthening and decorating this haven with God's truths. As we start utilizing this heart to connect with its Source, we begin to feel greater light. The lighthouse becomes strengthened. As we start talking to our Creator, the haven that is our heart becomes an even greater haven. It starts to expand and feel like a larger space of security and peace. As we engage in prayer and start remembering His words and promises, we realize that our thoughts do not rise above His truths, and they do not dictate the outcome of our affairs. His truth does not bend to our thoughts or illusions, but our illusions, thoughts, and fears all become powerless in the presence of His truth. We realize His control and power is stronger than anything else. We start to utilize His words, His truths, and His guidance to now help us see the ocean of our struggles more clearly. We start to see that the waves of our thoughts and the emotions that result from those thoughts can't stay high forever and eventually calm down, that the waves don't determine the reality of the entire ocean or world, and that we were giving them far greater power than they deserved. As we fall into *sujood*, and our mind rests on the ground, we remember that we don't always have to let this mind lead and let it dictate for us what our future holds or who we are, but we can place it in God's hands and let Him align it beautifully and place the thoughts within it that will better serve it.

When my mind
becomes turbulent
with relentless waves,
I retreat to my heart,
so that I can be soothed
by its illuminated embrace.[185]

185 Poem by the author.

Keep Your Mind Malleable

One of the most powerful and fascinating features of the human brain is its neuroplasticity (or brain plasticity), the mind's ability and capacity to be malleable. Neuroplasticity is defined as "*the ability of the nervous system to change its activity in response to intrinsic or extrinsic stimuli by reorganizing its structure, functions, or connections.*"[186] This means that our mind has the ability to continuously adapt to its experiences and changes in the environment. It also means that the brain has the chemical and biological capacity to structurally and functionally reorganize and rearrange itself, as we experience life.[187] Neuroplasticity is the feature that plays a role in providing us with protective factors in the face of traumas and helps us manage harsh circumstances, promoting our ability to be resilient.[188] Scientists also have identified that neuroplasticity occurs throughout our human development and all life stages, and has a great and wide capacity to play a role in many things such as development and even the healing of diseases.[189] This is the power of neuroplasticity, a marvelous feature and blessing that God has given us to access throughout our entire lifetime, but oftentimes we underutilize it.

Neuropsychology recognizes several key factors that contribute to neuroplasticity occurring in the brain. Amongst them, the most important and crucial ones are learning, new experiences, memory formation, and visualization.

For now, let's take learning. Every time we learn something new, and I mean *truly* learn, our brain forms new neurons and connections. Essentially, we are strengthening our neural pathways, which are the connections formed between neurons, and neurons are the cells in which information is transmitted (or passed) through electrochemical signals. When we don't continuously interact with knowledge, our neural pathways become neglected, and not strengthened. The same truth applies to the other factors mentioned above, that contribute to our neuroplasticity, such as new experiences, memory formation, and visualization (or imagination). When we do not engage in the factors that contribute to our brain's neuroplasticity, our mind becomes weaker. The brain slows down. And when the brain is weak and slow, it can't be a useful servant to the heart.

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186 Mateos-Aparicio P. & Rodríguez-Moreno A. (2019).

187 Zilles K. (1992).

188 Cioni, G., D'Acunto, G., & Guzzetta, A. (2011).

189 Doidge, N. (2007).

Be A Life-Long Learner & Student

Ilm (knowledge) is the greatest food for the mind. When we spend time learning beneficial knowledge, the mind becomes equipped with the right information to feed the heart. Today – with social media and the immense abundance of entertainment available for us to access within seconds – many people today feed their minds with all the wrong fuel. Today's minds are flooded with destructive music lyrics that are filled with messages of *shirk* (associating partners with God), content from shows and movies that deplete our spiritual reservoir, and an overabundance of information from social media and the news that only heighten and promote the mind's fear and negative thoughts. We often are feeding our mind with food that does not nourish it – in other words, junk food for the mind. Not all food is the same in nutrition and value. Just like the body, the mind needs the food that will actually nourish it, not just food that it will just consume so we feel good temporarily. Junk food gives our body very little nutritional value. It gives us a temporary high that often leaves us feeling negatively afterwards. It is amazing that there is food that actually nourishes the body, gives us energy, and leaves us feeling good; and there is food that actually depletes our energy, gives us no value, and leaves us feeling worse. It is up to us to choose wisely what kind of food we want to feed our body, and it is also up to us to choose wisely what kind of food we feed our minds.

We have become programmed to choose fast entertainment and fast, feel-good information that gives us a dopamine rush, rather than actually training ourselves to sit and deeply connect with real knowledge that will bear fruits in our inner world and behaviors. As you learned so far, dopamine is known as the "feel-good hormone," that plays the role of a neurotransmitter, passing information between neurons in our brain. It is part of our reward system, and when released, it gives us a temporary feeling of pleasure and motivation. Dopamine is released whenever we engage in anything that is exciting, pleasurable (i.e., food, sex, etc.), or when we are expecting a benefit or reward. And as mentioned earlier, every time we learn something new, it is exciting, and therefore dopamine is released into our body. As a result, we feel good temporarily. But eventually, that dopamine dosage ends. And instead of sitting with the information we just learned, we want to get another dopamine rush by learning something new. This is why many people are addicted to learning new information but not doing anything with that information.

Being a seeker of knowledge who prioritizes knowledge and true learning over just having information stored in the mind, is not as comfortable or dopamine-stimulating as watching a 1-minute comedy segment on Instagram

or going to Netflix to watch the latest show. Just like choosing to eat healthy, choosing to seek healthy mind-food also requires us to say no to our *nafs*, so that our mind can get what it needs to serve our heart and being. Knowledge is the light that illuminates the mind and heart. It is the truth that detaches us from falsehood. It is the fuel that allows the heart to think, understand, interpret, and function beautifully in service of our higher self.

Knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim, because without knowledge, the mind has nothing to offer the heart and the heart can't help guide the mind and its thoughts and interpretations of our experiences. Without knowledge, we cannot be transformed on any level.

In Islam, we view knowledge as the foundation of sound emotions and behaviors. Without sound knowledge, our inner emotions or states do not become sound or beautified, and in the end, our behaviors also remain barren of beauty and transformation. Imam Al-Ghazali exemplifies this beautifully when he says, "*All of the stations of religion are classified according to three things: degrees of knowledge (maarifah), states (ahwal), and actions (a'mal). The degrees of knowledge give rise to the states; and the states bear fruit in actions. The degrees of knowledge, therefore, are like tree-trunks, the states are like the branches, and the actions are like the fruits.*" Here, without knowing it about 900 years ago, Imam Al-Ghazali was describing the foundations of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), which was only founded less than 100 years ago. CBT is one of the main treatment approaches utilized by clinicians to treat several disorders like anxiety and depression. Imam Al-Ghazali, an early and great scholar of Islam in the 11th century, was describing the connection between our mental experience, our emotional experience, and behavioral experience that is emphasized in CBT treatment, but his theory was rooted in none other than Islamic teachings, with what he found supported by the Qur'an and *sunnah*.

The mind has a powerful role in the emotions and behaviors we engage in. As you learned from the H.O.M.E. Method's Psycho-Spiritual Model, cognition, emotions, and behaviors are all functions produced or influenced by the mind, *nafs*, and heart, and their interactions with one another. When we utilize the mind to seek knowledge and learn that which benefits us mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically, we then set ourselves up to experience higher-level thoughts and emotions, and as a result, engage in higher-level behaviors. But when we keep the mind void of sound knowledge – knowledge of who we are, who our Creator is, what He has taught us about our path, and all the knowledge that benefits our growth in this world – the mind becomes like the barren earth that has not received rain. Nothing can grow from a land that does not receive rain, and nothing can grow from a mind that does not receive knowledge.

Islam teaches us to seek that which benefits us. And while there is much knowledge out there that benefits us, we often neglect the most foundational and sacred knowledge, which is the knowledge that God has taught us. We often are more ready to try a new meditation taught to us by an Instagram influencer or coach than to actually follow a prescription from God and His messenger. While there is nothing wrong with gaining and trying new practices that are *halal* and beneficial, we should have a greater readiness to apply what God and His Prophet (ﷺ) taught us first. Today, many people are struggling because they are disconnected from the most necessary knowledge that is designed to illuminate the mind, heart, and being, and that is the knowledge that God revealed through His prophets (ﷺ) from the beginning of mankind, to give us guidance. As God tells us in the Qur'an: "*Allah (God) desires to explain to you, and to guide you into the ways of those before you, and to turn to you (mercifully), and Allah (God) is Knowing, Wise*" (4:26).

Our faith is the greatest blessing we have. It is a miracle, a gift, a light, and the most valuable treasure we should be grateful to God for every day. And God has perfected the way He prescribed for us to live.[190] Through the Qur'an and *sunnah*, God has taught us how to live, grow, and transform individually and collectively. He did not leave anything out, so much so that as Muslims we are even taught how to properly cleanse ourselves when using the bathroom. Even the non-Muslims 1400 years ago were amazed by this, seeing how detailed and comprehensive the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) were. A non-Muslim man once said to the great companion, Salman al Farsi (رضي الله عنه), "*Your Prophet teaches you everything, even how to go to the toilet.*"[191] Islam is a holistic way of life that gives importance to the connection between mind, heart, emotions, behaviors, relationships, and environment. Therefore, its teachings highlight all areas of life, even how we maintain our hygiene habits. We are taught in another *hadith* by Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) that cleanliness is half of the faith.[192]

Islam even emphasizes the relationship between the heart, in which faith grows, and our ability to be clean and maintain cleanliness in our environment. That is because everything is connected. Islam has been teaching holistic wellness for hundreds of years. Today, more than ever, the West is recognizing the benefits of truths taught to us by our beloved Prophet (ﷺ) about 1400 years ago. An example of this is the new attention that the *siwak* is receiving from the West. The *siwak* is the natural toothbrush made from trees that the

190 Qur'an, 5:3.

191 *Sahīh Muslim*, 262.

192 *Sahīh Muslim*, 223.

Prophet (ﷺ) used and encouraged us to use daily, that has tremendous oral hygiene benefits. Another example is black cumin seeds (or *Nigella sativa*) , which several research studies today have confirmed that black seeds have tremendous curative power.[193] 1400 years ago, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us that "*black (cumin) seeds are a cure for all diseases except death.*"[194]

From teachings about health to teachings about relationships and navigating life's tests, Islam gives us the foundational knowledge that creates the building blocks for minds and hearts to become healthy, nourished, and more able to receive and correctly filter and process other beneficial knowledge of life, whether that is psychological knowledge or beneficial knowledge in any area of life. God has equipped us with everything we need to live nobly, elevated, wholeheartedly, purified internally and externally, and in line with His truths and design. For only the Creator and the One who designed us can prescribe the best way for us to live in line with our design. So while seeking knowledge as a whole can be tremendously beneficial, we cannot neglect the healing and transformative power of connecting to the knowledge that the Qur'an gives us and following the great example that Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) gave us to show us what it means to live by that knowledge.

To lead from the heart, we need to continuously take care of this mind, its health, what it absorbs, but also its malleability. By continuously prioritizing learning, the mind becomes a great powerhouse and resource for the heart. That is very essential, for any leader needs a great mind behind them. If a leader has a weak mind behind them, their ability to lead will be limited.

God gave us the power to keep our minds healthy, young, and malleable, so that it can be a great support and servant to the heart. But many of us have neglected true learning. We are simply satisfied with the temporary release of dopamine when we learn something new, but rarely revisit that information. And worse, many people have stopped learning as a whole. They have been running on what they learned at a certain period of their life.

Many people today are content with swiping through numerous video snippets or watching show after show, and not actually learning anything beneficial to their mind and heart that will bear fruits in their actions and behaviors. So, it's not just learning that we have to engage in, but it is learning what is beneficial, that will truly make our heart malleable in the most beautiful way, the way that is most in service of our heart and our soul's path in this world. This is why our Prophet (ﷺ) taught us to make the following *dua*, "*O Allah (God), I ask You for beneficial knowledge, goodly provision and acceptable*

193 Tavakkoli, A. et al. (2017).

194 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, 5687.

deeds,"[195] and in another *hadith*, "*O Allah (God)! I seek refuge in You from the knowledge which is not beneficial...*"[196]

We don't want to gain just any knowledge. We want knowledge that *benefits* our whole being. We want beneficial knowledge that transforms our behaviors and holistic wellness. We do not want knowledge that harms our mind, forms unhealthy neuron connections and pathways, because those neural pathways are what will be utilized by the mind to serve the heart. The heart then receives the information that does not nourish it or its alignment with our higher self. It depletes it, making its defenses against the *nafs* weaker, and leaving its position of leadership vulnerable to being taken.

Seeking knowledge has to be an important part of our routine just like anything else we deem important for our health. We have to make time for it. We have to set aside time from our day or week to learn the Qur'an, read something new that is beneficial, memorize new verses (as memorization also supports the brain's malleability), or revisit verses we memorized or something we already read. Short videos, shows, and movies can't be our *only* source of information. We have to revive true learning in our life, whether that means we are going to commit ourselves to learning the *tafsir* (meaning) of a chapter in the Qur'an, or take a class, or finish a book we started. But whatever we do, we can't abandon learning. We have to cultivate the mindset and heartset of being life-long students. This is how we benefit ourselves, but also benefit others.

The teachers I learned most from in my life, were the ones who were also students. They were in a perpetual state of seeking knowledge. I would learn from them and also witness them learning from others: from their colleagues, from those younger than them, from those older than them, from those offering classes in their communities, or even from their own students. I would see them with a pen and paper in hand and ready to learn. They taught me that knowledge is not a destination but a path. It is the means, not the end. It is a tool we use and *not* who we become. It is meant to shape us, not define us. It is meant to humble us, not make us feel superior.

And we must remember this in the world we live in, where oftentimes seeking knowledge, education, degrees and titles become destinations rather than tools to help us serve our own hearts and the hearts of others; where how much we know makes us feel superior; where positions of leadership and scholarship keep people from being vulnerable, open to growth, and humbling themselves to learn from others and continue working on themselves; where gaining knowledge has made many people close themselves off from learning

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195 *Sunan Ibn Majah,* 925 (Sahīh Darussalam).

196 *Riyad as-Salihin,* 1479 (Sahīh Muslim).

and benefiting from one another, and instead, are competing with one another.

But this is so harmful to our hearts and it speaks to the fact that we forgot the purpose of seeking knowledge. We seek knowledge so that we can live in truth. We seek knowledge so the direction to God becomes clear. We seek knowledge so that we can benefit our hearts first, and benefit the hearts of those who cross our paths. We seek knowledge so that the way to *jannah* becomes illuminated. We seek knowledge so that *God* may be known, not so that *we* may be known. We seek knowledge so that which is good and beneficial beautifies us, God's creation, and His world. Knowledge reminds us of our position as servants to God and our responsibility to serve His creation. It reminds us that God is our Ultimate Teacher and we are always His students. It reminds us that we are always poor and in need of His knowledge, help, and guidance. And only then, when we remember these truths can our hearts stay alive and our minds stay sharp and malleable.

Revisit Knowledge You Learn

When we learn something new, it first is sent to our short-term memory, but only some of that information is stored in our long-term memory storage. To reach our long-term memory storage, that information has to be revisited and repeated. We need to constantly be engaging with what we learn (either through repetition, reflection, or experience), where we are taking the time to be present with information, reflect upon it, interact with it, try to apply it into our life, so that information goes from short-term memory to long-term memory.

There is a strong relationship between learning and memory. According to Dr. Wolfe, an expert on the relationship between brain research and educational experiences, "*learning is the act of making (and strengthening) connections between thousands of neurons forming neural networks or maps*," while "*memory is the ability to reconstruct or reactivate the previously-made connections.*"[197] Essentially, what this means is that when we absorb new information (or learn something new), new connections are formed between neurons, but when we try to remember something or revisit that information, those neurons become reactivated, strengthening that neural pathway. This is powerful for us to know, but what I find missing from this conversation in the work of neuropsychology, is the power and role of the heart in helping us learn and remember.

I believe it is the heart that guides us to revisit information we learn. I believe it is the heart that guides the mind to reactivate neurons and strengthen neural pathways. We may utilize our senses and mental processes to learn

197 Wolfe, P. (2018).

something new, but what motivates us to revisit that information or recall that information? It is the heart. The heart is the master of the mind, and therefore, it is the belief and vision of the heart that guides the mind to search for the information important for us to revisit, remember, and access. Think about this: we absorb thousands of pieces of information per day. Of that information, which information do you find yourself revisiting? It is most likely information that is meaningful to your heart, that the heart sees value in. I believe that is why we are encouraged in Islam to not only memorize the Qur'an, but revisit what we memorized so we don't forget it.[198] It is the heart that guides the mind to recall and revisit the verses it initially absorbed. And it is the heart that motivates millions of Muslims to have the entire Qur'an and *hadiths* memorized. But unfortunately, when it comes to the research on learning and memory in the West, the heart is often neglected.

It is the heart's condition and leadership that allows us to prioritize true knowledge, which is not just absorbing new information but *revisiting* that information. When the heart prioritizes God, His truths, His values, the heart won't just be satisfied with the mind gaining new information. The heart will tell the mind to access it again and again. This is why I emphasize with my students the importance of revisiting knowledge they gain in any one of my courses, lessons, and programs. When we do this, we stop leading from our minds, and we start leading from the heart. In doing so, we build the muscle of prioritizing our heart's connection to that knowledge and its guidance of the mind to reactivate what it once learned. As a result, the brain becomes malleable, and becomes a stronger servant of the heart.

Visualize With the Mind to *Actualize* With the Heart

As mentioned earlier, visualization (or imagination) is one of the factors that contributes to the neuroplasticity of the brain. Research utilizing brain imagery shows that visualization is powerful and effective, because neurons in our brain actually interpret imagery as being the same as an actual action. For example, in a research study examining the effects of positive visualization on strength-training workouts, such as weight lifting, it was shown that athletes who engaged in positive visualization (imagining themselves performing the workout to the best of their ability) were able to lift more weight than the athletes who did not engage in positive visualization.[199]

This research study highlights how visualization strengthens the mind and body connection. When we visualize a goal – when we form an image in

198 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, 5031; *Sahīh Muslim*, 789.

199 Watkins, J. & Turner, Z. (2020).

our minds about what our goal looks like – our brain produces an impulse that informs the neurons in our brain, creating a new neural pathway, which promotes our ability to act and function in a way that is consistent with our visualization and image in our minds. Essentially, we are more likely to act upon that image and translate that mental imagery into our behaviors and actions. This was also demonstrated in studies done on people who were trying to lose weight.[200] Those who engaged in forming mental imagery about their weight loss process or visualized what they will look like when they are healthy and fit, had more success losing weight. So, visualization is powerful, but what I find missing (as mentioned about several topics I have covered in this book so far) is the powerful role of our hearts.

The heart is the key bridge between visualization and action. And I believe, when our mind engages in visualization, it becomes a great servant of the heart, for nothing activates the heart as powerfully as imagination. When we utilize our mind to engage in forming mental imagery about something we want to achieve, the heart becomes awakened and deeply connected to that imagery. The heart starts to believe it. And when the heart believes something, it is more likely for the limbs to be moved accordingly.

Islam teaches us that it is the heart – and its reality, beliefs, and sight – that guides a person's actions. When *iman* (firm faith) and belief enters the heart, the heart then guides the tongue and limbs to act accordingly. And when we engage in visualization, it makes what we are thinking about a reality in the heart, especially if what we are visualizing is what is good, pure (*tayyib*), and beneficial to our holistic well-being and in service of our *ruh*. In essence, what is *visualized* by the mind is *actualized* by the heart. And it is only what is actualized in the heart that truly moves, guides, transforms, and elevates our thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and entire life.

It is not a coincidence that in the Qur'an, God utilizes great details to explain events and stories. The more details we have about something, the more we can imagine and utilize our mind to visualize that reality. This is why reflection and meditation are encouraged in Islam, especially when it comes to the verses of the Qur'an, so that God's truths become rooted beliefs in our heart, and in turn our actions are beautified by those beliefs.

If visualization is so powerful that it helps a person achieve great goals like 100lb weight loss, running a 10k race, achieving a goal that people told them was impossible, then imagine if we utilize it towards our greatest goal that we claim to have as Muslims, and that is reaching *jannah*, our *ruh*'s final and greatest home. In the Qur'an, God gives us great details of our greatest goal and destination, which are reflected in the verses below:

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200 Solbrig, L. et al. (2019).

"*Their garments will be of fine green silk, and gold embroidery. They will be adorned with bracelets of silver, and their Lord will give them a pure drink.*" (76:21)

"*Allah (God) has promised the believing men and believing women Gardens under which rivers flow, to dwell therein (forever), and beautiful mansions in Gardens of everlasting bliss. But the greatest bliss is the Good Pleasure of Allah (God). That is the supreme success.*" (9:72)

"*...in it are rivers of water the taste and smell of which are not changed; rivers of milk of which the taste never changes; rivers of wine delicious to those who drink; and rivers of clarified honey (clear and pure) therein for them is every kind of fruit; and forgiveness from their Lord.*" (47:15)

"*Gardens of perpetual bliss: they shall enter there, as well as the righteous among their fathers, their spouses, and their offspring: and angels shall enter unto them from every gate (with the salutation).*" (13:23-24)

Visualization is one of the most powerful ways to develop a deep connection to our goals, from the smallest goal in our life to the greatest and most permanent of goals, to enter *jannah* when this temporary world is no longer a reality. Visualization is one of the most powerful practices to help us direct our thoughts to forming an image of where we want to be (in this world and the next), and then activating the heart's connection to that image, so that we begin to act upon it. And it is precisely why I emphasize visualization and why I am passionate about creating and providing guided meditations in my work at The H.O.M.E. Institute.

Visualization (and the use of imagery) is a great psycho-spiritual tool that empowers our ability to actually see the manifestation of our goals. The term "seeing is believing," is true. The more we can visualize what our goal looks like, the more our heart believes it is a reality. And when the heart is connected to our goals, it becomes very hard for us to give up or steer off the path that takes us to our goals.

So, make sure you take time to first identify what your holistic goals are that serve your higher self, and its peace and success in this world and the next. And then start visualizing those goals. Start imagining what it will be like to achieve them and to see them as a reality. Imagine yourself being someone who is at peace internally. What would *that* look like? Imagine being someone who prioritizes God and the nourishment of your heart each day. What does *that* look like? How does it feel? Imagine yourself becoming your healthiest self on a spiritual, mental, emotional, and even physical level. What does *that* look like? What would your day look like if you revolved it around your 5 meetings with God? What would you be doing differently if you were healthier? What would your life look like if you were more present, loved God more, let go of unhealthy attachments, or loved yourself more? Imagine yourself standing in

front of God in the world that is real, inevitable, and true, and Him telling you, "*...enter My Paradise*" (Qur'an, 89:30). Imagine you entering *jannah* and seeing what God described for you in the Qur'an. Imagine seeing those you love from those who have passed away, to Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), to God Himself. For, as we are taught by Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), we will see God as clearly as we see a full moon.[201] Visualize, visualize, visualize. Whatever you deem important in life, use your mind to visualize it, and you will see just how powerfully this mind will serve your heart's awakening and connection to what matters.

If this is how God
beautifies a world
in which we reside
in only temporarily
Then imagine how
He beautifies a world
in which we will
live in forever.[202]

Transform How You Think About God

Our thoughts have an unbelievable impact on our behaviors and how we experience our life. We have to be more aware of our thoughts and how they interfere with our acts of worship, the way we make *dua* (pray and supplicate), our attitude towards our life and future, and how we view our relationships, especially our relationship with God. One huge and primary thought to monitor is how we think of our Creator. Do we truly have a good opinion of Him? Many of us walk around with misunderstandings and skewed thoughts about God. It could be as a result of how we processed past experiences, traumas, and struggles, but most of the time, it is due to our lack of knowledge about who He really is. Understanding His Names and Attributes can help improve our opinion of God. And once you transform your thinking about God, not only will it ignite your heart and bring you closer to Him, but you will find that beautiful and positive thinking patterns towards yourself, His creation, and your life, will surely follow.

> "*So it is necessary for the one who would contemplate the attributes of God most high to have emptied his heart of desiring anything except God–great and glorious. For knowledge is the seed of longing, but only to the extent that it encounters a heart freed from the thorns of the passions, for unless the heart be empty the seed will not bear fruit.*"[203] – Imam Al-Ghazali

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201 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, 7434.

202 Poem by the author.

203 Al-Ghazali, A. (1999).

In this quote, Imam Al-Ghazali is reminding us that the work of knowing God's names is very much related to the extent in which we protect the heart from the *nafs* (or ego) and its desires and influences. The *thorns* are the passions of the *nafs*. The more we refuse to give the *nafs* leadership over us by not following or appeasing its every request, the more we make room in our heart for the knowledge of *who* God is. The heart can then also guide the mind to continue seeking that knowledge and engage in thoughts that reflect a good opinion of God. When the heart is the lead, and the mind is the servant, the mind works hard to correct any false thoughts it has about who God is that may have been from previous influences of the *nafs*. With the heart as the lead, the mind knows it can only give the heart thoughts that reflect who God truly is, not who He isn't. And as we live our lives thinking well of God and believing well in our hearts of God, God – as He promised – will match what we think of Him. For God tells us in a *hadith* Qudsi, "*I am what my servant thinks of me.*"[204]

This is positive thinking at its core, but a type of positive thinking that serves the heart so powerfully, and is rooted in God's promise, not our own guesses or illusions. Positive thinking in today's world is often practiced with the self or the universe as the destination. Through Islam, we learn to direct our positive thoughts to not just ourselves – and we definitely do not direct them to a creation of God as "the universe" that has no power over us except by God's permission – but we learn to direct them ultimately in the end to the Most Powerful, Creator of the Universe and all that exists. God promised that He will meet us to the extent that we think of Him. This means that if we think that He will come through for us, He will. If we think He will protect us, He will. If we think He will answer our prayer, He will. If we think He will help us through a challenge, we will find His help encompassing us. If we consistently think of Him as He *is*, the Most Loving, the Most Merciful, we will find ourselves enveloped in love and mercy throughout our life. If we think He will heal us on any level, whether that be a spiritual, emotional, or physical healing we are in need of, we will find a facilitation of that healing on our path in the most beautiful ways.

Put Pen to Paper

In this high-tech world we live in, many people can go months without even writing anything on a piece of paper or notebook, yet alone their thoughts or reflections. Writing our thoughts and reflections down is not as fast as typing, and doesn't come with the ease of storing something digitally or emailing it to ourselves, but it offers us something far greater. It engages the mind in a

204 Hadith 15, 40 Hadith Qudsi.

way that typing doesn't. There is power in putting pen to paper. It reinforces information in our mind and heart in a much stronger way than when we type. I believe there is a reason why God swears by the pen in the Qur'an (in the chapter titled "The Pen"). I also believe there is wisdom in the fact that the first few verses ever revealed in the Qur'an included the verses where God says: "*...and your Lord is Most Generous, Who taught man by the pen, taught man that which he does not know*" (96:3-5).

I believe the pen has something to offer us. And, while technology does make things easier, I believe depending on it completely can deprive us of the benefits that simple and timeless tools of learning have to teach us. In fact, psychological research recently confirmed that writing impacts the brain's ability to learn more powerfully than typing. One study discovered that students who used a pen to write their notes on paper learned more than those who typed their notes on their computer.[205] It showed that writing helps the brain process, comprehend, and retain the information better than those who are typing.

Essentially, our cognitive abilities are enhanced when we write, but as you learned so far through the H.O.M.E. Method, the function of cognition is not just limited to the mind, but also the heart. Therefore, when we write, we are not just processing, comprehending, and remembering with the mind, but also with the heart. For me, writing has been one of the best ways that information in my mind is transformed into knowledge in my heart. It is an opportunity for my heart to make sense of what my mind knows, and the words that end up on paper have become my teachers.

Key Practice Tips

Don't let this day pass without doing one thing from what you learned in this chapter, to help your mind be a great servant of the heart. Here are some tips:

1. Be vigilant over your senses today and what you absorb from the world. Be sure to set boundaries with social media, monitor what you absorb online, and the amount of time you allow yourself to be online. Remember, social media is flooding your brain with constant dopamine and an excess of dopamine does not allow your mind to powerfully serve your heart and its presence.

2. Take a few minutes today to connect with the verses of *jannah* I shared earlier. As you are reading them, pause to reflect on them and visualize yourself there. Repeat this often, and watch how your heart comes alive and you become more connected to your prayers and deeds.

205 Mueller, P. A. & Oppenheimer, D. M. (2014).

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Living By H.O.M.E.
Master The Art of Navigating Your Emotions

Emotions are a powerful part of our life. They are great blessings from God, for they help us understand our inner world. They relay messages to us about our thoughts, beliefs, needs, and truths. Emotions color our experiences, and without them we would be missing crucial pieces we need to fully understand and interpret our experiences. For example, anger is telling us we feel wronged or our rights have been transgressed. Resentment may teach us where we have neglected ourselves and our needs. Fear may tell us what our worth is most attached to. Every emotion can be a great teacher in our inner world. But in today's world, many people struggle to understand emotions and navigate them beautifully. As a result, emotions end up navigating *us* and our behaviors.

Emotions are the inner states that we experience in response to what we witness and interact with in the world. But many people think that all emotions are a direct response to an event or circumstance, when oftentimes they aren't. According to Cognitive Behavioral Theory, emotions are not a direct response to the events and circumstances we experience, but rather a direct response to the thoughts and beliefs we have *about* our experiences. For example, if we face a threat to our safety, our brain immediately registers the thought that we are in danger, and as a result, we feel immediate fear. If we get a phone call and receive beautiful news, then our brain will register the thought that this is good for us, and as a result, we will immediately feel happiness. These emotions then in turn impact our behaviors or how we outwardly react to that experience.

Emotions have a great impact on the choices we make each day. And because they are powerful experiences within our inner world, they influence how we select our behaviors and actions. When we do not understand emotions or how to navigate them, we will be mindlessly and heartlessly engaging in actions that do not serve our growth. When we do not have a healthy relationship with our emotions, the fear, anger, sadness, agitation, or boredom we may feel in life will influence us and the decisions we make each day without us even realizing. This is what leads many people to engage in destructive behaviors like self-sabotage, emotional eating, over-sharing, over-explaining oneself, procrastination, adult tantrums, verbal outbursts, or worse, addictive habits

and physical aggression. Understanding our emotions, and learning how to navigate them beautifully, will allow us to not make them the lead and authority over the way we choose to react and live our life. Navigating our emotions in a healthy way will protect the heart from relinquishing its leadership position to these fleeting states we experience in life.

Do Not Worship Your Emotions

Emotions are not designed to be worshiped. They are not our Lord. They do not have the final say over our experiences. And they do not deserve to be our highest value. If they are, we are placing them in the same status that only God deserves, which as mentioned, is a form of *shirk* (associating partners with God). Today, many people engage in *shirk* when it comes to their emotions, where they submit to them in the way that we should submit only to God. Submission to something is to be entirely devoted to that one thing. When we submit to our emotions, we become entirely devoted to following them, satisfying them, and becoming completely guided by them. We then start to believe that our emotions justify any behavior we engage in, even if that behavior is not good for us. For example, someone may punch someone, and then say "*well I was angry*," thinking that their emotion is enough to justify hurting someone. Submission to our emotions above anything else is greatly destructive.

In Islam, we are taught that only God is deserving of that complete devotion, for nothing else is designed to sustain submission to it. When we fully surrender to our emotions, letting them have complete authority over us, we harm ourselves. Anytime we worship or submit to anything other than God, we self-destruct, because only a True God can be surrendered to and has the infinite capacity to truly guide us. Whenever we make anything other than God our highest value, we find ourselves regressing in our progress and growth, or worse, spiraling downward into a dark abyss. *Tawheed*, the Oneness of God, essentially saves us from ourselves, because it protects us from submitting to false gods that cannot sustain us and are not true destinations. When we worship anything other than God, whether that be our emotions (or feeling good), Ramadan itself, our good deeds, the spiritual high, or even the *Kaaba* itself, the heart becomes directed to an illusion that offers it nothing and does not quench its thirst. We will end up losing the benefits of our efforts.

I learned this truth so powerfully on my first *umrah* trip to Makkah and Madinah in 2013, the trip that started the journey of developing the H.O.M.E. Method. During that trip, I learned one of the most powerful lessons that will always stay with me. It was one of those moments of complete clarity that leaves you so humbled and in awe of God's closeness. Nothing happens

without God saying, "*Be and it is*," and no moment is a coincidence. Prior to this trip, I had a spiritual question that I was seeking an answer to for a while, and it was, "*Why is it that every time I feel the spiritual high, I lose it?*" At that time in my life, I felt like my *iman* (faith) or what I thought was my *iman* at the time, was a roller coaster. Every time I felt this blissful rush of *iman*, I felt like I was holding a hot potato that I became afraid was going to drop at any moment. I understood that *iman* goes up and down, and that is usually the advice that I got from teachers. But something in my heart always made me feel that what I was going through just wasn't that. Until one night in Madinah, I and another sister on our trip ended up sitting together outside of Masjid Al Nabawi and talking. This was a sister who actually was from a different state, so she didn't know me and I didn't know her. But after spending a couple of hours together just silently sitting near each other outside of Masjid Al Nabawi, we ended up talking about our experience and I shared with her what I have been feeling with regards to my *iman*. Her response was simple and to the point. She literally said one short sentence and as soon as she responded, I felt that God had answered me through her speech, and that like every other moment in our lives, it wasn't a coincidence, and God was teaching me once again. She said, "***Seek God, not the spiritual high.***" I was in awe and couldn't believe that a simple statement like that had addressed the very core of my struggle that I have been seeking answers for, for quite some time.

In that very moment, I realized it wasn't necessarily my faith or belief in God that was wavering, but that I was very attached to the feelings that come with the acts of worship: the spiritual high. I was able to immediately see, just from that one sentence my friend said, how we become so obsessed sometimes with the feeling and the benefits that acts of worship have to offer us. We say things like, "*I did 'a particular act of worship', but didn't feel anything.*" I have even heard people say that they don't pray anymore because they stopped *feeling* what they wanted to feel in prayer. And we do this with even smaller acts of worship, where we abandon them when they do not produce for us a spiritual high. We forget that it is not the rush of beautiful emotions or the benefits that we are ultimately seeking. We are seeking God. We are worshiping Him. The increase in faith (*iman*), the tranquility, and all the benefits we receive from prayer, fasting, doing good deeds, and all the acts of worship are not the goal. They are gifts from God, and just like any of His blessings, they are not meant to be worshiped, and they are not guaranteed to be there 24/7. But God is *always* there, constant, and we fall into the trap of seeking that emotion or spiritual high, and when we get it, we get deluded into feeling like we arrived at our destination, and that is why it goes away so fast. It was a false destination.

God is the True Destination, so when we are seeking God, we never will feel like we have arrived, and it's such a beautiful and humbling feeling to

always crave more of His love and closeness. That feeling might not be that high spiritual bliss we hope to have 24/7, but we are left with something much more powerful, a constant longing to be near Him. This longing is what will keep us striving to perfect our acts of worship until the day we do arrive and finally meet Him. Also, we realize by seeking God, that just because we do not feel a certain way after praying or making *dua*, doesn't mean that we didn't benefit from those acts of worship. And sometimes, that benefit will not always translate into us feeling a certain emotion.

This experience during my first *umrah* taught me so much about emotions as a whole. We as human beings of course love to feel good, but emotions are not permanent states or destinations. They are fleeting states that come to teach us and leave, never designed to become who we are or, more importantly, our highest value.

Treat All Emotions Fairly: Welcome Them All

To ensure that we do not give emotions the position of leadership over us, we have to become more fair in the way we view and respond to both *feel-good* (or easy) emotions and *not-so-feel-good* (or difficult) emotions. The hardest part about going through struggles is sitting with the difficult emotions: the pain, the grief, the hurt, or just the discomfort of change in our lives that we are enduring. But if we can shift the way our mind and heart view and understand pain, our heart can become more open to accepting the difficult emotions and being nourished by what they have to offer.

God teaches us great lessons through *all* the various emotional states we experience in life, and only *when* we learn to embrace and accept all our emotions, can we allow for a process that will help us see what they have to teach us. This is a truth that Rumi beautifully highlights in his poem "The Guest House," which is a poem I have utilized to help many of my clients and students better understand emotions, their purpose, and – more importantly – how to hold a welcoming space for them. In this poem, Rumi says:

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,still, treat each
guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the
malice, meet them at the door
laughing and invite them in.
Be grateful for whatever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.[206]

206 Rumi (2004).

Make Room for Both Peace and Pain to Coexist

Peace can sit right next to our pain, sadness, or grief. Even in the Qur'an, God says: "*Verily, **with** every hardship there is ease*" (94:5). He does not say "*after*" every hardship there is ease. That is because there is an opportunity to feel ease and peace *through* the struggles we encounter, but it depends on how we choose to react to what happens to us. This ease and peace can come when we open our hearts to what God wants to teach us through every experience and through every emotion. It comes when we begin to practice gratitude for what we already have in the reality that God created for us. It comes when we accept all the emotions we go through and view them as a means to Him. When we build the muscle of accepting all of our emotions without discrimination, we open our hearts to receive and feel greater joy and meaning in life.

A beautiful and peaceful life can result from embracing not just the happiness, but the pain and any unpleasantness we encounter as well. The unpleasantness of life is part of our story, too. Our life has the space and capacity for happiness and pain to exist, both contributing to our stability and growth. Unfortunately though, in our pursuit of happiness, we forget to make room for anything else. But if we do decide to embrace all that God sends our way, if we decide to focus on the reality of what is in front of us, and not the illusion of what could be, if we accept *all* of our experiences, even if they are painful, we might not feel happiness every time, but we have a much higher chance of attaining something greater: inner peace and liberation.

I believe in the co-existence
of polar opposites
That pain can rest next to relief
That clarity can hug our confusion
That hope can walk right next to our fears
That the waves can crash
and the ocean still be calm
That we can fly
but still be grounded
That we can be imperfect
but still be a masterpiece
That we can rise while we fall
That we can laugh so deeply
and still have a heart that weeps rivers
And that we can feel the sweetness of heaven
while going through what feels like hell[207]

207 Poem by the author.

Save Your Energy For What Matters

Today, many people's struggles are exacerbated because they spend so much time trying to resist, fight against, or avoid and suppress any emotion that does not feel good. Many of us view difficult emotions as an enemy we have to keep shut out for us to feel secure and safe, like they are a threat to our security, when in reality, they aren't. I remember one time, a friend called me to tell me how frustrated she was that she was having a good day until grief came up within her. This friend had lost her father several years prior and in that moment, she felt her day was ruined because grief visited her. I asked her, "*What makes you think you are still not having a good day?*" She said, "*Because I am feeling sadness right now and I was feeling happier before.*" To that I said, "*But sadness can be a part of your day, too, even your good days.*" I encouraged her to welcome it, to sit with it, and to not let her grief define her day as bad. I reminded her to be a gracious host to her grief, for it has every right to visit her from time to time given the tremendous loss she faced. Losing a parent is one of the greatest pains and tests of life, and that is why grief visits from time to time. It is an expression of that loss. She told me she never looked at her grief that way before. In fact, she was always afraid of her grief and it making its way back into her heart and day, and that fear shaped her life each day with greater anxiousness. So, we talked about how welcoming her grief when it visits takes up less energy than fighting it or fearing it, and will actually allow her to better channel it to God, or channel it into a prayer for her father, connecting her to him and the world in which he lives. Perhaps grief visits so that we can connect to our loved ones who are alive in a realm that we are just temporarily veiled from. This had a tremendous impact on her relationship with grief and the difficult emotions she experiences in life. She started viewing her grief as part of her story and not an enemy on her journey to healing. Instead of fighting it or resisting it, she would then take her grieving heart to God and spend time in *dua*. The grief she used to view as a reflection of a "bad day," now became the means to a beautiful day that nourished her not only emotionally but spiritually.

Difficult emotions are not our enemy. And they do not threaten the security of our entire being. They only threaten the security of one facet within us, and that is our *nafs*. The more we lead from our *nafs*, the more we will reject any difficult emotion that enters our day. And when that happens, that very emotion we did not welcome, now is going to try to get our attention another way. It will show up in our reactions that day, and in our choices and behaviors. For anything we fight or reject within us will always show up in a different form or will show up with more intensity down the road. The ocean teaches us this truth powerfully. Infact, the ocean has been one of my greatest teachers

on my journey to navigating myself, and my path in life. Our emotions are a lot like waves, in that we can either welcome them and go right through just as they are swelling up, or we can fear them and wait till we are hit hard, when they crash with much greater force. God shows us that just like the ocean tells its story through its waves, our ups and downs, highs and lows, and inner shifts, are all essential parts of our story, too. The waves in our lives shape our journey. And through them, we recognize that our heart has this amazing capacity to experience our path in life with the great depth of an ocean. As Rumi beautifully says, "*You are not a drop in the ocean. You are the entire ocean in a drop.*"[208]

Another great lesson that the ocean taught me is to not bring into my life more hardship than the test intends. In the ocean, there is a phenomenon that occurs known as a rip current, which can be very dangerous for swimmers. It is known to be the cause of many drownings. Swimmers often are unaware of the current because they often can't visibly see it with their physical eyes, and the waves often don't signal any major disturbing changes. But the current is there, internally, even though the waves are crashing at the shore as they usually do, giving the illusion that everything is fine. Inside this ocean, there is a current so strong that it is pulling water from the shore many yards into the sea. A person will be pulled so forcefully until they find themselves in deep waters unable to free themselves from the grip of this current. In this situation, one can only feel complete powerlessness and panic when you realize that there is something happening to you all of a sudden that you do not understand nor can you free yourself from it. So what do people usually do in such a situation? They fight and fight hard against this disturbance that their minds can't comprehend. That is what we usually do when our mind cannot logically find a solution to something. We simply cannot accept it, so we push our mind to think again, fight again, resist the test, because we are not okay with not having an answer. But it is the *fight* we put up when we can't free ourselves from our test that hurts us the most. It is the fight we put up that blinds us from the message and the solution. In fact, contrary to most beliefs, it is *not* the rip current itself that causes people to drown. People often drown as a result of the immense fatigue they experience from the battle they were just fighting. And life guards who are trained at tackling such phenomenons in the ocean advise swimmers to not waste their energy escaping this current only to be dragged back in. Instead of escaping towards the shore, swimmers are advised to swim parallel to the shore. As one is swimming parallel, they are neither escaping the current nor are they being consumed by it. They feel its presence but are

208 As qtd. in Vehapi, F. (2015).

not confined by all its traps. Their goal is safety – the shore – and eventually they will get there, but not as quickly and not as how they planned. But only when we stop escaping and fighting does God open our hearts to see new roads and pathways that the mind could not comprehend and see.

Painful experiences are part of life, and thinking otherwise or fighting that reality can hurt us. Whether it's a wave that knocks us down, a current that pulls us in many different directions, or a storm that shakes our security, recognize that the fight you put up is what can hurt you the most. The fight is what leaves us feeling like we are drowning in our emotions and struggles, and only when we stop resisting and settle into the discomfort of not having a solution or an immediate way to feel better, can we truly succeed and survive the test. Remember, our experiences can shake us, challenge us, hurt us, and cause us pain, but the way we respond and react determines whether that pain will turn into suffering, or if it will become a means to our relief and what we were meant to gain through the struggle.

Practice Self-Acceptance: Avoid Self-Abandonment & Self-Rejection

Many people have a hard time navigating their emotions because they are constantly denying them, minimizing them, and abandoning themselves. This is often a result of trauma and messages they received, especially in childhood, that their emotional needs are not important. When a child's emotional needs are constantly neglected, they learn to neglect and abandon them as well. That emotional abandonment they received from their parents taught them to abandon themselves too, even throughout adulthood.

Self-abandonment is one the major reasons why people are confused about their emotions, what they are, and how to navigate them. This can be seen quite clearly in those who struggle with codependency, where their sense of self is an extension of others. Codependency is the struggle to see your worth, needs, emotions, and identity outside of your relationships. It is not knowing where you end and others start. It is the struggle of feeling overly responsible for the pain and problems of others that you forget your own needs and inner nourishment. As a result, you feel completely empty when people you love are not there for you or there is no problem for you to fix. The struggle of codependency causes a disconnect from one's true self, true emotions, true needs, leading the codependent self to attach to others for their identity, worth, and sense of self. And it can multiply the pain of loneliness and abandonment.

The cure for addressing self-abandonment is by showing up for oneself as you would for others. And this *must* include an acceptance of what you feel. When we accept an emotion we are having, whether that be anger, hurt,

sadness, or resentment, we are not saying we will act on it in the wrong way. We are simply saying, "*I am listening*," "*I am valuing myself enough to acknowledge what these feelings are telling me*," and "*I am going to advocate for myself by believing and validating what I feel, without judgment.*"

The more we listen to our inner experience – what our emotions are telling us – and more importantly believe them, the more we accept ourselves. Acceptance is the opposite of abandonment and rejection of one's emotions. Many people who struggle with self-abandonment will often apologize for simply having emotions or feeling hurt. My work with those who engage in self-abandonment is teaching them that every time we apologize for a feeling or emotion we have, we are further disconnecting ourselves from our truth. Each one of those moments are moments of inauthenticity. We are denying our own experience to manage someone else's. When we do that, it is ourselves who we owe an apology to, because we are oppressing our God-given freedom to feel. That is a right given to every human being and sometimes we are the ones taking that right away from ourselves. We must remember that we can apologize for an action or behavior, but we owe no one an apology for how we feel. We do, though, owe our inner being a validation of all its experiences, because it is only through acceptance and not denial that we can empower positive growth and change within ourselves.

Accept God's Validation Of Your Emotions

Our validation of ourselves is powerful, but we as human beings are wired to seek something greater and outside of ourselves. Being creatures of connection, our hearts long to be heard and seen. This is a natural need and one that is very important for our holistic wellness. A heart that feels seen and heard thrives and grows beautifully, like a plant that is well attended to. There is a great spiritual, psychological, and healing power in a soul feeling seen and heard: we can see this when a child feels seen and heard by his or her parent, when a husband feels seen and heard by his wife (or vice versa), when a community member feels seen and heard by their community leaders, or when one feels seen and heard by a friend. Feeling seen and heard, or its lack thereof, has a significant impact. But if there is such great power in being seen and heard by another human being, imagine then the power of truly feeling seen and heard by the Creator, the Lord of All Worlds, by the King of kings, by the Greatest, the Most Loving, and the Most Compassionate. We need God's validation above anyone else's. God already validates our emotions, for validation comes from being seen, heard, appreciated, and acknowledged, which all are attributes of God.

God has named Himself
The All-Seeing,
The All-Hearing
So you always feel
seen and heard.[209]

God recognizes every one of our struggles, heartbreaks, and pain. He sees and witnesses all, and in the Qur'an, He constantly validates and acknowledges what we go through. He teaches you His names so you know that your pain is heard and seen. Your grief in this world is heard and seen. Your tears and cries are heard and seen. The words you don't share with anyone are heard and seen. The heart-break that feels so heavy to carry every day is heard and seen. Your efforts that no one notices are heard and seen. Your dreams are heard and seen. Your story, your past, your struggles from the day you were born until now have all been heard and seen. There is nothing about you that goes unnoticed by your Creator. Open your heart to this truth today and let yourself feel more enough, whole, and sufficed by Him seeing you and hearing you. There is no greater validation and nourishment to receive in this world.

God's validation always surrounds us, but many of us do not embrace His validation. We do not accept His validation because we are not looking for it. We are often too busy seeking validation of our emotions from others, and sometimes people who are incapable of offering validation. But once we turn to God first, we can experience a great validation that no human being can offer us. We will feel it with our heart and once we do, we will begin to practice that same validation and acceptance with ourselves. We will accept our struggle more easily, as we know God is with us. We will be less likely to resist or run away from our pain or test, knowing God sees what we are going through and as we acknowledge that this is a test from Him that holds value for us not only in this world but the next. We become deeply connected to the truth that every person's test is different and custom-tailored by God to meet what we need, and not necessarily what we want.

The more we embrace His validation of what we are going through and practice it towards ourselves, the less we will search for others to do that for us. We will feel a warmth and compassion fill our heart as we gain firm ground and become independent of people to validate what we are going through. We will accept that we are on our own journey with God and will not compare ourselves or our path to others. That is how we gain peace in this world and a great reward with God for turning to Him for validation above anyone else's and for accepting gratefully our customized test from Him. When we turn

209 Poem by the author.

to God first, we might even find ourselves not in need of going to people for immediate emotional soothing. But if we do still go to people, our dependence on them to give us what only God can give becomes lesser, and instead of seeking full validation we will be looking for connection and support, which is something we all have the right to seek.

Remember that when you bring your needs, weaknesses, or vulnerabilities to the creation, their ability to honor them may fall short. Their reaction may even hurt you. But when you show your needs, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities to the Creator, His ability to honor them will *never* fall short. His reaction will never hurt you. And what the creation may have viewed with critical, arrogant, and judgmental eyes, God views with love, mercy, and a readiness to give to you and elevate you because of what you brought to Him and trusted Him to carry. One of God's names is *Ash-Shakur*, the Appreciative, the One who responds abundantly to one small deed or one small step that His servant takes towards Him. He will always appreciate you bringing your heart, your pain, your struggles, your vulnerabilities, what the world deems a weakness, and in turn He will nourish your heart abundantly with all that will give you strength. His love for you will only grow, for God loves the servant that turns to Him, depends on Him above anyone else, and humbles his heart in front of Him. So whenever you feel invisible and unseen by God's creation on earth, take your heart to God, and He will make you not only seen but loved by Him and His creation in the heavens. Take the eye of your heart off the gatherings on earth and let the eye of your heart fixate on a far nobler gathering in the heavens. Prioritize God and what He holds for you, for nothing is greater and more worthier of your heart's attention than that. God is *Al-Ghanee*, the Rich, the One who does not need but who holds all that *you* need.

Al-Ghanee

You have been turning
to the people
for too long darling.
But they are poor
just like you.
Their hands are empty
and stretched out
towards the heavens too.
They are in need
and their faces
are marked by salty lines
just like you.
So look away
and then look up.
So that your heart
adjusts its view.
And so your limbs
can walk towards
the One who never
looked away from you.[210]

210 Poem by the author.

Do Not Project Onto God How You Feel

Many people project onto God how they feel about themselves. Through my work with others, I have seen people speak for God in a way that actually reflects how they are feeling and speaking about themselves. In addition, I have seen people displace the emotions they have towards others, on God. For example, a person may be angry with someone else for a particular action or experience they went through. Instead of acknowledging the anger they feel towards that person, they become angry with God. They start blaming God for the outcome of their affairs. This is a common defense mechanism we recognize in psychology, called displacement, where people cope with their emotions by placing it somewhere else they perceive to be safer. This is why emotional awareness is very important and why it's important to acknowledge and accept how we feel, whether that be towards ourselves or others, because we do not want to place it in the wrong direction, especially towards God. The best way to avoid this, is to let God speak for Himself, by going directly to His words. When you find yourself saying "*God hates me*" as a result of you feeling hate towards yourself, or "*God abandoned me*" as a result of you abandoning yourself or feeling abandoned by others, it is important to acknowledge and change what you really feel about yourself in those moments. And instead of speaking for God, it is important to go directly to God's words and what He has to offer you in those difficult moments. A great chapter in the Qur'an to connect to in those moments is Surat *Al-Duha* (Chapter 93 of the Qur'an) where God says: "*Your Lord has not abandoned you, nor has He become hateful (of you)*" (93:3).

Do Not Let Your Emotions Define God's Love For You

God tests those whom He loves. One's difficult emotions through the test (i.e., grief, sadness) doesn't change that. In fact it wouldn't be a test if it didn't come with difficult emotions. It is through the difficult emotions and experience that God allows His servant to gain strength, grow, and be prepared to receive what is greater, in this world and the next. This is particularly important for religious communities where faith is often associated with people's emotional state. There can even be a lot of judgment towards others, where people look at others going through great pain or sadness and think, "*if they had faith, they wouldn't be struggling like that*," when it is most likely because of their faith that God is testing them. Perhaps if He had tested those being judgmental with the same test, they would have crumbled and responded in a far worse way. So if you are the one going through a test and find yourself being judged or your emotions being minimized, or you find yourself unable to find someone who

understands the depth of your pain, remember the *dua* of Prophet Ya'kub, when his grief towards the loss of Yusuf was also not understood. His own sons, who were responsible for the loss of Yusuf, judged him: "*They said, 'By Allah (God), you will not cease remembering Yusuf until you become fatally ill or become of those who perish*" (Qur'an, 12:85). To that, Prophet Ya'kub responded by saying: "*I complain of my anguish and sorrow only to Allah (God), and I know from Allah (God) what you do not know*" (Qur'an, 12:86). What is so beautiful here is that Prophet Ya'kub himself did not feel shame or judgment towards his sorrow and grief. He simply took them to the One who doesn't judge us for the natural pain that comes with a test or struggle.

There are some tests on our paths that bring us a kind of pain that at times feels unbearable. It is the kind of pain that is so heavy that we may feel like it is breaking us. It is the kind of pain that we may not be able to express. And when we try, we may not find those who see it or honor it. It is the kind of pain that may make us feel excruciatingly lonely in this world. And it is the kind of pain that may lead us to question in our darkest hour, "*Am I even passing God's test?*" "*What does this say about my faith?*" If you ever feel like this, please remember: how you feel is not a reflection of where you stand with God. How you feel is not a reflection of whether you are passing or failing the test. Your pain does not define God's love for you or what He holds for you. Your pain is part of the test, and it wouldn't be called a test if it didn't come with any pain. Your faith and success through the test is not defined by this deep pain you feel.

And we do not have to look farther than the story of our beloved mother, Maryam (Mary, ﷺ), who was tested with such a difficulty that she cried in anguish, saying the words relayed to us in the Qur'an, "*Ah! would that I had died before this! would that I had been a thing forgotten and out of sight!*" (19:23). She was in so much pain that she wished she didn't exist to endure it. And is Maryam any less beloved to God because of this? No, she became the mother of Issa, and a mother of the believers. God did not change the rewards, honor, or status He intended to give her because of her pain. And this is because, faith and pain are not mutually exclusive. Your belief in God can sit right next to your pain. You can have trust in Him while crying in anguish. You can say "*alhamdulilah*" and be desperate for relief. Remember, your pain is what makes your tests, and your tests are custom designed for your path. Feel the pain, sit with it, do not fight it, and do not define yourself by it. Take it to God so that He may show you what it has to offer you. Let it direct you to Him. And when the pain feels too heavy to carry, never feel ashamed to ask for help. God never asked you to bear the pain alone.

Powerfully Direct Your Emotions to God's Names

Emotions left undirected begin to direct us. Many people have this false perception that an ignored emotion has no impact, but emotions are like energy, and they move whether we like it or not. And there is no greater destination for our emotions than God. Every painful experience or emotional agitation directs us to an attribute of God that we have not yet accessed. That hopelessness you feel is introducing you to *Al-Fattah*, the Greatest of Openers, the One who opens doors when all doors are closed. That confusion you feel is introducing you to *Al-Hadi*, the Ultimate Guide, who will light your way towards clarity and the truth you long for. That internal distress you feel will introduce you to *Al-Salam*, the Creator of All Peace, internal and external. Every experience, whether a happy one or a difficult one, is there for us to experience our Creator more deeply because that is where true joy and healing lies. When we look at every experience as a guide from Him, God will open the intellect and perception within our hearts, allowing us to witness truths and derive meanings about Him and our journey in this world.

This is a truth I witnessed in my own life. God's names and attributes have been a haven for me in my most difficult of times. I learned that they have the power to shift not only my emotions but my entire day. They have the power to take a challenging and difficult day to a day full of greater joy and peace. We all have days when we feel like our hearts are heavy, when we feel not so great internally, and when we feel like we do not know what to do to help ourselves feel better. I remember a specific day in which I felt exactly this and a particular name of God transformed this day into one of the most beautiful days. I remember how heavy my heart felt the morning of that day. I remember sitting there on my couch with my difficult emotions, letting myself just feel the weight of my heavy heart and thinking how am I supposed to get on with my day feeling like this. I remember the tears falling down my face as I sat there reflecting on my feelings and what I can do to get myself to a better space emotionally. I told myself that sitting with the pain was what I needed to do in that moment, so that I can see what it has to offer me. A few minutes passed and my heart was still heavy. Nothing changed. My heart still felt constricted. So I decided to make *dua* and I prayed for the opposite: for my heart to not be constricted. I asked God to flip my heart. I wanted my heart to be expanded, to feel lighter, to be more open so that I can feel more nourished to get on with my day.

As I made *dua*, I then remembered that one of God's names is *Al-Basit*! God is *Al-Basit*, the One who expands and provides abundance. He is *Al-Basit*, the Unfolder, the Expander, and the Releaser. When we think of this name, though, we often think of God increasing our material abundance, unfolding

situations or matters in our lives, or releasing us from external difficulties. But we rarely think of how God can be *Al-Basit* for us on an internal level. God is also *Al-Basit* with our hearts, not just with the matters and tests in our lives. God can expand our heart and increase our abundance on an internal level. It is God who fills the heart, beautifies it, increases its abundance and its capacity to feel, be nourished, and be expanded. So I placed my hand over my heart and I kept repeating this name and reflecting on how God can be *Al-Basit* with my heart in that moment, how he can expand this constricted heart of mine, release its heaviness, and unfold what my heart needed to learn from my difficult emotions. And within a short while of repeating this name and letting my heart feel what my tongue was saying, by God's mercy and kindness, I began to feel lighter. My heart felt more open. I felt a complete shift from how I felt before I began to say, "*Al-Basit.*" And I even gained a better perspective on what was bothering me. And yes, this happened within a short while of just sitting with my emotions and utilizing my emotions as the means (not the end), and a pathway to the Name of God that spoke to what I was feeling.

God tells us in the Qur'an, "*Say, (O Prophet,) 'Call upon Allah (God) or call upon the Most Compassionate—whichever you call, He has the Most Beautiful Names*" (17:110). The names and attributes of God are so powerful for our spiritual and psychological well-being. I have not only witnessed the power of this in my own life but in the lives of my students and Muslim clients I have worked with. God's names have the power to help us navigate our thoughts and emotions in the most beautiful of directions. Throughout the Qur'an, God teaches us about who He is, so that we have so many ways to access His closeness, His power, and His help. He wants us to be aware and connected to just how close He is to us and to our hearts. By learning about who He is, we recognize how sufficient God is for us, how He holds all that we need, how He is the Source of all that we have and all that we are praying for. By learning and connecting to His names, we begin to learn how to seek our nourishment through Him and realize that He can provide for us not just on an external level but on an internal one as well.

So whatever your emotional state is, whether it is a state of ease or difficulty, whether it is a state of happiness or sadness, build the muscle of making the emotion the means, not the end. Do not halt as if what you are experiencing is your final reality. Do not treat something designed to be temporary as your permanent home. Do not settle there and allow your experience to grow roots. Get up and take the experience to God. Treat it as something you carry and not something that carries you. Treat it as a vessel, a means of transportation, and not a home. Be the traveler He created you to be and keep walking the path He is paving for you.

And as you walk, remember that He is *with* you every step of the way and He is the One who awaits you at the end of this path. He is *Al-Awal* and *Al-Akhir*, the First and the Last. He was there at the beginning of your path, He is there *as* you walk your path, and He is Who you are walking towards. And every experience we witness on this sacred path serves as a means for us to strive towards Him and experience Him on a greater level, because that is where true purpose, joy and healing lies.

Train yourself to let every agitation or stress you feel direct you to *As-Salam*, the Source of All Peace, internal and external. Let the feelings of "not being enough" or feelings of being "less than" propel you to the door of *Ash-Shakur*, the Appreciative, the One who appreciates all that you do and gives without bounds. Let the worries and uncertainty you feel take you to *Al-Aleem*, the Knower of All, hidden and seen, the Source of all knowledge you have and don't have. Let the love you were given or the love you long for turn your heart towards *Al-Wadud*, the Loving One, the Source of all Love that exists and touches our lives in many forms. Do not let what you witness end with *you*, for you are not the destination and neither are your emotions. God is and will always be the True Destination and nothing else is worthy of that position.

"*The most beautiful names belong to Allah (God): so call on Him by them.*"
(Qur'an, 7:180)

Avoid Judging the Value of an Action By Your Emotions

Many times, people judge the value of their actions by how they feel. You may feel good about an action, but that action might not have any intrinsic value for you spiritually, mentally, emotionally, or personally. It might make you happy, but provides you no meaning or benefit. Therefore, you enjoy the temporary experience of "feeling good" by doing that action, but then receive no growth, nourishment, or greater inner peace in the long run. A great example of this is mindless shopping or what society has fed us to believe is a form of therapy, as we call it "retail therapy," to give us the illusion that it is something that heals us or alleviates our pain. In the end, you may buy something that has no meaning for you, but just makes you feel good. As a result, you enjoy it for a while and that's it. The emotion passes and so does our attachment to what we bought.

The other mistake that many people make is that they may judge an action as bad just because it produces *not-so-feel-good* emotions. But an action is not intrinsically bad just because we feel bad. Many great actions do not necessarily feel good. For example, initiating a difficult conversation after an argument with a loved one may not feel good at all, but it is a great action and one that is of high value in front of God. You may be working towards a great goal,

and the journey there can be emotionally challenging and testing, but that doesn't mean that the actions you are putting forth towards that goal are not great. You may feel sad as you take yourself to pray, but that prayer and God's acceptance of it, is not defined by your emotions.

So, it is very important to avoid judging or defining our actions by how we feel. Actions should be judged and defined by whether they are pleasing to God (or *halal*), or whether they are displeasing to God (or *haram*). And they are defined by our intentions, the truth driving that action, and our sincere efforts to follow through on those intentions.

Know That Behaviors Influence How You Feel

Many people today make the mistake of thinking that it is emotions that always have to precede behaviors. This is a common misconception. And as a result, people often wait to feel a certain way before engaging in actions and behaviors that serve them. In psychology, we recognize that our behaviors often precede emotions, and can in fact play a role in how we feel and our psychological well-being. For example, exercise can reduce anxiety and stress. A person can be feeling all kinds of difficult emotions, but after exercising, they feel better. Even in the treatment of depression, we often focus on behavioral modification, where we encourage the client to engage in behaviors that will improve their mood alongside the work we do to address their thoughts and beliefs. Our actions are powerful in shaping our inner world. In fact, our actions constantly send messages back to our inner world. For instance, when you smile (even when you are going through difficulty or are sad), a message is sent to your brain that tells it you are happy. A smile (forced or not) causes your brain to release happy hormones such as dopamine and serotonin. It also can contribute to reduced stress and a lower heart rate. So here, we can see that choosing to smile not only benefits the brain, but the heart and entire body. It is no coincidence that smiling is an act of charity in Islam, as our beloved Prophet (ﷺ) has taught us.[211] It has such a powerful and positive impact on the inner world of not only the one smiling but the one receiving the smile.

So what does this tell us? It tells us that while what we do internally most definitely impacts us externally, what we do externally also impacts us internally! A great example of this is when we find things to smile about through doing a gratitude check, even when we are going through difficulty. Other examples of external actions that impact us internally are when we help others, give charity, or do good deeds. Research shows that doing good and thinking of others and their needs impacts our internal world. It can help us step outside

211 *Jami' at-Tirmidhi*, 1956.

of our bubbles, gain a new perspective, shift us internally and contribute to increased peace and joy. So the lesson here is that everything interacts with each other. The work we do on ourselves internally, such as cultivating internal gratitude, drawing closer to God, navigating our thoughts and emotions, and purifying our hearts, all can positively move our actions and limbs, but we can't always wait to feel a certain way internally to do good deeds or engage in actions that serve our hearts. We can't underestimate the power of our actions, for oftentimes we have to move our limbs and engage in good actions to move our emotions and inner world in the positive direction.

Do Not Be Afraid To Communicate What You Feel

Letting go of something that disturbs our heart or has hurt us does not mean we ignore it, mask it, or pretend like we are no longer affected by it. It does not mean we say all the right things to avoid our truth or tell ourselves that we "don't care," or that we "forgive" or that we are "over it," but still walk around with a heart that is not free. Letting go often means communicating: to God, to ourselves, or to those who play a role in our heart's disturbance. It means that we actively put in effort to release that which is disturbing our internal peace.

To do so, we must not fear confronting our emotions and communicating them. What we should fear more is the resentment and anger that can live in the heart as a result of not doing so. Unexpressed emotions do not just disappear. They begin building homes in our heart and the heart always expresses what resides within it even if we do not speak it. Because it is what we do not speak that reveals itself through our actions, behaviors, interactions, and the way we treat others. Even if we say all the right things, and use all the Islamic phrases we know to mask our true emotions, the energy we give off is real and is felt by others. Remember, the heart's truth always guides our actions and interactions even if the tongue moves to mask it.

"*When a thing disturbs the peace of your heart, give it up.*"[212]
— Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ)

Do the Work of Emotional Regulation

Navigating our emotions is not an easy endeavor, especially for people who have been through trauma. Trauma can cause great emotional dysregulation, and this requires healing. When we are exposed to trauma, it impacts our nervous system and bodies. This is why people, who have been through trauma, may feel completely overpowered by their emotions and have a hard time

212 *Al-Zuhd wal-Raqa'iq*, 1147 (Sahīh al-Albani).

directing it, because it's not on the surface. They are buried much deeper. If you struggle with regulating and soothing yourself emotionally, therapy is a great place to do this work. The more you heal from your trauma – address the underlying emotional wounds – the less you will be led by your emotions. Remember that everything is connected. The work you do in therapy on your psychological health impacts every other area, even your spiritual health and the health of your heart. The more you heal, the more you make room in your mind, heart, and soul, and the less reason your ego has to try to lead you.

Key Practice Tip

Identify an emotional experience you are having today (difficult or easy emotions). Take some time to reflect on the names of God that speak to your emotions and what you are feeling today. Spend a few moments calling upon God with those names and ask Him for help with navigating the difficult emotions you are experiencing, or thanking Him for the beautiful emotions you are experiencing.

18

Living by H.O.M.E.
Pursue Meaning Not Happiness

Happiness. We all seek it. We all strive for it. And when we experience it, we are afraid to lose it. We constantly make happiness the end goal, the ideal situation. Even in our constitution, it is the *pursuit* of happiness that we have the right to have. Happiness being the destination is so ingrained in our collective and cultural mindset. And we often struggle because of this mindset. In today's world, many people worship happiness, and many believe that happiness should define what we do or do not do. Society is influencing us to go against our very soul, for the sake of happiness. People say things like "*Well, if that's what makes you happy*," to normalize behaviors that aren't normal at all or in service of a person's true well-being. We have misunderstood happiness to be a destination we arrive at, when in reality it is an emotional state.

Happiness is an emotion – just like sadness, fear, and anger – and emotions come and go. They are fleeting. They come with the various experiences that we encounter in our lives. But many of us we view anything other than happiness as an intruder or an enemy that does not belong in our lives. Our "feel-good" and dopamine-pushing culture promotes this. We equate the things that make us happy as *good*, and the things that make us sad or uncomfortable as *bad*. Islam teaches us that emotions do not define what *is* actually beneficial or harmful for us. In the Qur'an, God tells us: "*And it may be that you dislike a thing which is good for you and that you like a thing which is bad for you. Allah (God) knows but you do not know*" (2:216). The value of an experience, blessing, test, or action is not defined by how we feel. We can go through a difficult test in life that feels quite painful, but that very test is what is actually contributing to our growth, renewal, strength, and opening the door to greater good.

The Heart Needs Meaning to Lead

Many people are deceived to think that their heart's wellness comes from chasing happiness or making happiness the highest value. But it's not true. You could be happy today because something wonderful happened, but your heart could still be not at peace, and once today passes and the happiness fades, you are still living with your heart and its malnourishment. So, even our heart's nourishment is not defined by how we feel.

What nourishes the heart is meaning. Becoming meaning-driven requires that we look at our experiences with a heart that is looking for truth, not a *nafs* just looking to feel good. Unlike happiness, meaning is not an emotion you feel. Meaning can be a great influencer of our emotions, but is not an emotion itself. It is a "*truth of significance*," that we derive from what we intend to do, give, receive, and experience. In contrast, happiness is something you feel as a result of how you thought or interpreted an experience you went through. Meaning is a far greater value than any emotion, and gives us something far more important than just a fleeting emotion, and that is inner peace. Inner peace can exist even in the presence of difficult emotions and difficult times. For example, a person can be experiencing great grief and emotional pain due to the loss of a loved one, but still have great inner peace knowing God is rewarding them for their pain. A great example of this is the story of Prophet Ya'kub. He experienced great grief and loss, but found solace and peace in His trust in God. Prophet Ya'kub was meaning driven. He had deep certainty that there was great value with God through everything He was going through. As a result, he found peace through the pain.

Meaning is what nourishes the heart and *ruh*, and allows us to unburden the mind. For everything cannot be understood on a rational and logical level by our brain. Our hearts possess an intellect that is different from the intellect of our rational brain. When we feed our minds without feeding our hearts, the ability to derive meaning and truth from our life and experience will be limited. Our heart has the ability to derive meaning from experiences that our mind could not logically break down, rationalize, and understand. And when our heart is connected to its Source, it has the ability to derive the most truthful of meanings from our painful experiences and even our happy ones. As a result, the heart becomes more nourished as it derives an intrinsic value from what it witnesses. That is what meaning is: an intrinsic value within an action, experience, or circumstance.

Oftentimes, seeking meaning actually leads us to greater joy and happiness, but this is not always a product of meaning. This means that living meaningfully may not always make you happy, but it is worth it in the end. It will contribute to your long-term transformation and peace. For example, a person might find great meaning in being a volunteer at their local mosque, by participating in services that help other people, but not *always* experience direct happiness as a result of doing so. In fact, they might experience other emotions such as frustration or even sadness due to a community members's negative behavior or reaction to their efforts, but because they know the "why" (or meaning) behind their actions, this frustrating emotion is also accompanied with a sense of peace and connection to the importance of the work they are doing with

their community. And in the long run, this work will produce greater benefits for the community, but also for them in front of God.

Seeking Meaning Through The H.O.M.E. Method

Meaning is something we *all* have the opportunity to access regardless of our present emotions or circumstances. It is the light that exists within every dark tunnel. And it is what beautifies every happy occasion. Islam teaches us that every experience we go through in life is packaged with meaning, for nothing God ever does is in vain. God Himself acts and plans with great wisdom. This means that nothing we go through is void of His wisdom, which means nothing is void of meaning. And, "*He is the Wise, the All-Aware*" (Qur'an, 6:18).

To derive meaning, we need the mind and heart to be present. We need the mind and heart engaged in *taffakur* and *tadabbur*. But above all, the heart needs to be connected to what is unseen, not just what is seen. Therefore, the H.O.M.E Method defines **seeking meaning** through an Islamic psychological lens as *the process of baseerah, a deeper, holistic and spiritual insight, which involves seeing with the heart what the physical eye cannot see, to derive truths of significance. Baseerah* is the ability to see what the mind cannot comprehend and what the *nafs* is blinded from.

Meaning is often unseen. It is hidden, like most treasures, to be discovered by only those who understand, reflect, seek, and most importantly, are guided by God. God is the One who unveils us to see the best of meanings. And our ability to see with our hearts the greatests truths and meanings that serve us not only in this world, but the next, depends on the condition of the heart. As God tells us in the Qur'an, "*Then do they not reflect upon the Qur'an, or are there locks upon (their) hearts?*" (47:24).

Build a Strong Connection to the Unseen (*Al-Ghayb*)

To derive greater and truthful meanings from our experiences, we must develop a strong connection to the unseen. *Al-ghayb*, "the unseen," is a key concept in Islam and throughout the Qur'an, and it is the foundation of *taqwa* or God-consciousness. This is reflected in the following verses of the Qur'an: "*This is the Book! There is no doubt about it—a guide for those mindful (of Allah), who believe in the unseen, establish prayer, and donate from what We have provided for them*" (2:2-3). In these verses, God describes those who have *taqwa*, mindfulness or consciousness of God, as first and foremost those who *believe in the unseen*. In Islam, establishing the five daily prayers is the greatest priority, and giving charity is also a great priority, yet in this verse, God orders the belief in the unseen as first. There is great wisdom in this. Belief in the unseen (*al-ghayb*) has to come first because it is what opens the door for us

to be steadfast in our acts of worship, but also in our ability to make [illegible] God in all our conditions.

In Islam, the *ghayb* is all that God has veiled from us. God Himself is veiled from us. God's other creatures, both *jinn* (including, *Shaytan*, and [illegible]) are veiled from us. The angels on our right and left recording our deeds are veiled from us. Heaven and hell are veiled from us. The hereafter, the world where souls go, is veiled from us. What happens to our loved ones when we put them in their graves is veiled from us. All the rewards God gives us in the next world for our good deeds are veiled from us. Tomorrow and what it brings is veiled from us. God's plan for us in the days or years to come is veiled from us.

The unseen (or *ghayb*) is a reality that is very alive and true, despite our physical and visual disconnect from it. But God gave us another visual tool to stay connected to what we can't see with our physical eye, and that is our heart. In Islam, through the Qur'an and *sunnah*, we are taught to keep the unseen alive in our heart, so that what is seen does not become our *only* reality. In fact, the Prophet (ﷺ) himself, who is more connected to the truths of the unseen than any of us, would affirm all the realities of the unseen when he would get up to pray in the middle of the night. This is evident in the following hadith in which it was narrated that the Prophet (ﷺ) would make the following dua (prayer):

> "*O Allah (God)! All the Praises are for You; You are the Light of the Heavens and the Earth. And all the Praises are for You; You are the Keeper of the Heavens and the Earth. All the Praises are for You; You are the Lord of the Heavens and the Earth and whatever is therein. You are the Truth, and Your Promise is the Truth, and Your Speech is the Truth, and meeting You is the Truth, and Paradise is the Truth and Hell (Fire) is the Truth and all the prophets are the Truth and the Hour is the Truth. O Allah (God)! I surrender to You, and believe in You, and depend upon You, and repent to You, and in Your cause I fight and with Your orders I rule. So please forgive my past and future sins and those sins which I did in secret or in public. It is You Whom I worship, None has the right to be worshiped except You.*"[213]

In the psychology and self-help world, we know the mental and emotional power of affirmations, and how affirmations can help us connect us to helpful truths and replace false beliefs we carry. In this supplication, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) teaches us the best of affirmations as he renews his connection to all the truths that exist that are not visible to our naked eye, but are very much real and alive. This is a great practice for us to follow, to make time in each day to recite this supplication, just as our Prophet (ﷺ) did, so that these

213 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, volume 8, Book 75, Hadith Number 329.

truths stay alive in our hearts. If God's most beloved (ﷺ) felt the need to affirm these truths, how can we not? Our heart needs a constant connection to the truths God taught us about that we are visually disconnected from. And we need a constant and deep connection to them if we truly live with sacred authenticity and truthfulness, but also with great meaning.

For our heart to truly lead, it needs to be deeply connected to the unseen, and to look beyond the world existing right in front of us. A heart that is the lead knows that there are greater truths existing and alive, and the only thing that keeps us from witnessing these realities is a veil that God places between us and them. Only a veil keeps us from seeing God. Only a veil keeps us from seeing His angels. Only a veil keeps us from seeing His greater plan for us. Only a veil keeps us from seeing our loved ones who have passed, who are very much alive, in a world that is real and true.

> "*Goodbyes are only for those who love with their eyes. Because for those who love with heart and soul there is no such thing as separation.*"[214] — Rumi

The heart is the only facet within us that has the capacity to see (in a different form) what the physical eye cannot see. The physical eye cannot see God, but the heart knows God exists. The eye of our heart sees that truth very clearly. The physical eye cannot see heaven and hell, but the heart holds the belief of their reality. The physical eye may tell our brain that there are no solutions in front of us for a problem we face, but the heart sees God and knows that He has all the solutions. The brain may tell us that all the doors are closed to something we have been praying for. But a heart that is the lead and connected to God, sees and knows that a greater door is always open with God.

> Remember, the clouds may hide the sun,
> but it doesn't mean that the sun is not setting.
> The moon is always whole,
> even when all we see is the crescent.[215]

When we prioritize God's truths and connect our hearts to the unseen, our hearts come to the lead and our ability to derive meaning exponentially grows. As a result our inner peace and holistic well-being flourishes as well. When we don't prioritize God's truths, neglect our connection to the unseen (which is ultimately a neglect of the Qur'an and *sunnah*), our heart becomes cut off from its nourishment, and it won't help us see what we need to see. We become deprived of meaning, and what is seen becomes our only reality. When this happens, we naturally will place a dependence on our mind more than it can

214 Thomas, E. (2017).

215 Poem by the author.

bear. The *nafs* will not like not having all the answers, and therefore will keep pressuring the mind to make sense of its tests and struggles.

Existential psychology teaches that people's inability to derive meaning from their experiences is what often transforms the pain they naturally feel through a struggle into suffering, a greater and harmful kind of pain. This is where the saying "*pain is inevitable, suffering is optional*," comes from. And although I don't believe that all suffering in the world is optional and I will leave that for God to judge, I do believe, from my work with others over the years, that our struggles do become significantly exacerbated when we do not derive meaning from them.

"*...despair is suffering without meaning.*"[216] — Viktor E. Frankl

But while existential psychology affirms the power and necessity of being meaning-driven for our mental health, what is missing from the discussion on meaning is the connection to the unseen. In Western Psychology, there is a growing emphasis on deriving meaning, but that process is still very much solely centered around a connection to our immediate world. And many of the Western self-help messages on meaning promote a fixation on this world only – and what is visible – depriving us of a holistic and beautiful acquisition of meaning.

Islam connects us to a holistic process of forming and deriving meaning that is not just about our journey in this world, but takes into account the entire journey of the soul. In Islam, we know that our journey in this world is not only very fast but significantly small in comparison to the entire lifetime of our soul. In fact, when the soul returns to God, and we are asked about our journey in this world, we will reply and say, "*We stayed for a day or part of a day*" (Qur'an, 23:113). God will then say, *You stayed but for a short while, if only you had known (how short it was to be and acted accordingly)! Or did you think that We created you in vain, and that you should devote all your time to play and entertainment, and that you would not be brought back to Us?*" (Qur'an, 23:114-115). This is how fast this temporary human experience is. It will pass by like it was one day of our lives. But we don't have to wait till our soul returns to God to understand this. All we have to do is reflect on the years that have already passed in our life, and we will see and affirm that they truly passed in the blink of an eye. This world is very much fleeting, temporary, and insignificant compared to the eternal and greater world we are returning to. As God tells us in the Qur'an, "*The present, worldly life is nothing but a pastime and play, but the abode of the Hereafter is truly alive. If they but knew,*" (29:64).

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216 Frankl, V. E. (1985).

The hereafter is one of the greatest elements of the unseen that we need to ignite our connection to if we are to empower ourselves on a spiritual, mental, and emotional level. Just the truth that the hereafter exists serves us holistically. It expands the heart to see much further than our temporary experiences (both the joyful and painful ones). I have worked with many people over the years, and I cannot begin to tell you how I have witnessed what a connection to the hereafter does for an individual's capacity to cultivate resilience through their struggles. A connection to the hereafter not only opens the heart to great meaning and peace, but also reduces the distress of individuals. It can contribute to people feeling lighter through their test, feeling more grounded, and – most importantly – feeling more hope.

Hope is the most crucial need of the human being. It is the most necessary ingredient to our peace, joy, and strength in this world. And it is a fundamental piece to our mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. In my work with depressed clients over the years, one of the most common experiences among all my clients is that they struggle with a lack of hope. Depression often presents itself as hopelessness. Those experiencing depression often lack hope towards the future and what it has to offer them. With no belief that what is to come is better, a person dives deeper and deeper into the darkness that he or she is experiencing in their present. For the darkness and pain in front of them is what they believe to be their only reality. That is *all* they see. Their vision and focus narrows in on what seems to be their only experience. They can't see outside of it and they can't see beyond it. It's a never-ending abyss, with much darkness and pain. So, hope is what a therapist tries to help a depressed client experience while tackling all the cognitive and emotional barriers that come between the client and hope. Hope is what gives a person something to live for, and what allows a person to see beyond the situation they are in. It is what allows a person to see more of what they have to *gain* rather than what they have lost. It is what heals, mends, and revives. Hope is meaning and meaning is hope.

In the Qur'an, God constantly fills our hearts with hope and directs our attention to its healing powers. He constantly reminds us of His help that will come through for us. He explains to us constantly the heart-warming and powerful ways in which He brings relief, clarity, provision, success, and revival to the lives of His creation. He has given us reason to hope from every angle. He has addressed all our hopes in the Qur'an: our hope for a good life, our hope for forgiveness, our hope for peace, our hope for good provisions, our hope for security, love, and happiness, and most importantly our hope for a beautiful destination to arrive at when our time in this world is over. With God, there is no end, no eternal darkness, no doors shut forever, and nothing ever really lost. With Him, there is always hope and always so much to gain.

"*Allah (God) made it but a message of hope, and an assurance to your hearts: (in any case) there is no help except from Allah (God): and Allah (God) is Exalted in Power, Wise.*" (Qur'an, 8:10)
"*Allah (God) is the ally of those who believe. He brings them out from darknesses into the light.*" (Qur'an, 2:257)

There is always hope when we connect to God's truths and promises, especially His truth and promise that this world is not our only reality or final home. But if all we fixate on is this world, we become deprived of hope. If all we are connected to is the visible, we will never find lasting peace. This world was designed as a temporary place, not a permanent reality. It was designed as a path and not a destination. Realizing this and connecting to what we cannot see, is crucial to our well-being, for it opens the heart to see what God is giving us in every moment, in this world and the next, and not just what we are being deprived of. We are reminded that our souls are eternal, and none of our deeds go to waste. No effort is lost in vain and with God, everything lost is found. In the world we do not yet see, every oppression finds its justice and every prick of a thorn finds its relief. And every single experience we went through will reveal its true value. As Prophet (ﷺ) Muhammad taught us, "*No fatigue, nor disease, nor sorrow, nor sadness, nor hurt, nor distress befalls a Muslim, even if it were the prick he receives from a thorn, but that Allah (God) expiates some of his sins for that.*"[217]

This life is so short and so very fleeting. The *akhira* (hereafter) is a reality. *Jannah* (heaven) is a reality. Meeting Him is a reality. I encourage you to meditate on these truths as much and as frequently as you can. And as you remember and reflect upon these truths, know that the fastest way to connect yourself to them is to practice visualization. As mentioned earlier, in the H.O.M.E Method, visualization is one of the greatest ways to awaken the heart and its leadership, and that God gives us so many details of the hereafter, especially *jannah* (heaven), so that the heart can be awakened by those realities as we reflect upon them and imagine and visualize them.

"*And no soul knows what has been hidden for them of comfort for eyes as reward for what they used to do.*" (Qur'an, 32:17)

Remember, the remedy and healing for our hearts lies in connecting to truth. Connecting to the truths God has taught us about in the unseen is what will purify and ignite our hearts, allow us to live from our souls, give us perspective, help us give everything its right, and liberate our hearts from the shackles of our egos and the *dunya*. It will awaken our senses and help us maximize our present. It will connect us very deeply to every intention behind every word

217 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, 5641.

we say and action we do. It will increase our sincerity, authenticity, and the hope we need to live our lives fully.

To experience these beautiful inner treasures, start reflecting on the unseen truths He has already taught us that are very much alive and in motion around us every day. How many of us are connected to the fact that in any given moment, there is an angel on our right and an angel on our left, recording our every deed? This alone shows us that every single action *means* something, to the point that God appointed angels, the most beautiful of creatures, to record them. There is not a single deed or action that we do that goes unnoticed by God. How many of us let it sink in that there is a book being written about each of us in a world that is real and true? And that we will each get the final and finished copy? This is how important our journey is in this world, that God appointed angels to write a book about it, and everything we do, so that we may see what we have put forth while we were here, and how we honored the life we were given.

"*Everything they have done is in the books, and everything big and small, is committed to writing.*" (Qur'an, 54:52-53)
"*And indeed, [appointed] over you are keepers, noble and recording; they know whatever you do.*" (Qur'an, 82:10-12).

Many times, people struggle because they feel like what they do in this world is not seen and valued by others. They forget there is a greater audience witnessing what they do. Everything we do is seen and valued by God, recorded by His angels, and accounted for in a loftier world. What is more valuable than this? To be seen and valued in a far greater world and more permanent world, that awaits your return?

Al-Ghayb

You see a world,
but you forget,
there is a greater
world that sees *you.*[218]

How many of us take the time to connect to the fact that when we begin prayer and say, "*Allahu Akbar*" (God is greater), that God turns His gaze towards us and does not turn away from us until we are the ones who turn the eye of our heart away from Him? Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) said, "*God is turning towards His servant so long as he does not look around, so when you pray, do not look around.*"[219] Not only does God look at us when we pray, but

218 Poem by the author.

219 *Sahīh al-Jaami'*, 1724 (Sahīh al-Albani).

He also speaks to us. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us that for every verse we recite from *Al-Fatiha* in each *rakat*, God responds to it, as reflected in the following *hadith*:

> The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "*Allah Almighty said: I have divided prayer between Myself and My servant into two halves, and My servant shall have what he has asked for. When the servant says, 'All praise is due to Allah the Lord of the worlds,' Allah says: My servant has praised Me. When he says, 'The Gracious, the Merciful,' Allah says: My servant has exalted Me. When he says, 'The Master of the Day of Judgment,' Allah says: My servant has glorified Me and my servant has submitted to Me. When he says, 'You alone we worship, You alone we ask for help,' Allah says: This is between Me and My servant, and My servant will have what he has asked for. When he says, 'Guide us to the straight path, the path of those whom you have favored, not those who went astray,' Allah says: This is for My servant, and My servant will have what he has asked for.*"[220]

God speaks to us in prayer but we are just simply veiled from it. It is an occurrence in the unseen, "*al-ghayb*," but a very real and true occurrence, and one we need to consistently revive our connection to.

Key Practice Tip

Take time to connect with, reflect upon, and memorize each of God's responses to the verses we recite in *surat al fatiha* (mentioned in the *hadith* above.) You can also implement the habit of reading them before every prayer, so that during prayer, you remember that you are not just speaking to God, but remembering that God is also speaking to *you*.

There are many other realities in the unseen that we are disconnected from and need to practice reflecting upon, so that our connection to them becomes revived. How many of us spend time contemplating on what God is doing for us behind the veils, when we are struggling or going through difficulties? How He is protecting us, planning for us, molding us, rewarding us? Many times, our sadness, hopelessness, and even resentment towards God, results from us forgetting that He is always planning in our favor. What we can see

220 *Sahīh Muslim*, 395.

will never come close to what we cannot see. And our disconnect from this truth causes many of us to lose hope in God's plan and what He holds for us. But we must remember that just because we can't see something doesn't mean God isn't actively planning in our favor. Therefore, we have to consistently train the eye of our heart to look beyond the limited world and visible reality that the physical eye is fixated on. We do this by reflecting upon who God said He is and by connecting to His truths and promises throughout the Qur'an and *sunnah* that teach us the unseen realities that He holds for us in this world and the next. By doing this, you will see that your mind will gain greater perspective. Your heart will become awakened by greater meaning and truth. And this world and all its problems will no longer appear so grand in comparison to God's greater plan, rewards, and truths.

> "*If the veils were lifted, (and God shows His servant) out of His kindness, what He does for his servant, of what he knows and what he does not know, his (the servant's) heart would melt out of love for Him (God) and longing for Him, and he (the servant) would fall prostrating in gratitude to Him (Allah). But the hearts are veiled from witnessing that because of their devotion to the world and their attachment to perceived causes, so they are prevented from the beauty and perfection of His favors. That is the decree of the Mighty, the All-Knowing.*"[221] — Ibn Al-Qayyim

Practice Remembering Death Frequently

Throughout the Qur'an and *sunnah*, the reality of death is a constant reminder that is brought to the forefront of our mind and heart. God tells us in the Qur'an: "*Every self will taste death. You will be paid your wages in full on the Day of Rising. Anyone who is distanced from the Fire and admitted to the Garden, has triumphed. The life of this world is only the enjoyment of delusion*" (3:185).

Remembering death gives great meaning to our life. It has a great and positive psychological impact on us for it awakens us to the great importance of the present. It allows us to walk this earth lighter, not carrying (on a physical, mental, emotional, or personal level) more than this short journey necessitates. Remembering death allows the heart to lead beautifully, and puts the *nafs* and mind in their rightful place. When we remember death, the mind becomes decluttered of what is not important, meaningful, and in service of this heart's growth and the wellness of our *ruh*. When we remember death, we diminish the force and desires of the *nafs*, for we remind the *nafs* that its time of play and comfort is only temporary, but also that it has no future in the realm that is real and true. Unlike our higher self (the *ruh*), our lower self (the *nafs*)

221 Ibn Al-Qayyim (2005).

dies when the physical body dies. Its desires and pleasures can only be chased in this world. As Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) tells us: "*Frequently remember the destroyer of pleasures (death).*"[222]

Death is the destroyer of pleasures, but I saw how often many of us interpret this *hadith* to refer to *all pleasure*. People often misunderstand this *hadith* to mean that remembering death removes joy or peace from our life. I used to think this, too, until I was on the journey to developing the H.O.M.E. Method. It was then that I realized that death doesn't deprive us of *all* pleasure, but just the pleasure of the part within us that is never satiated, and that is our *nafs*. Our *nafs* continues to chase the pleasures of this world without bounds until we remind it of its limitations. The reminder of death for the *nafs* is like the reminder of sleep for a child. Children often resist sleep because it puts an abrupt end to their play, excitement, and enjoyment of life. And the mention of sleep can make a child throw a tantrum. The same happens when the mention of death is made to the *nafs*. It puts an abrupt end to its play, excitement, and enjoyment. The *nafs* needs the reminder of death, so that it doesn't become our lead. For if we leave the *nafs* to lead without reminding it of death, it would never be satiated, and it would lead us astray. As Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us: "*If Adam's son had a valley full of gold, he would like to have two valleys, for nothing fills his mouth except dust. And Allah (God) forgives him who repents to Him.*"[223]

But while remembering death destroys the pleasure of our lower self, it increases the pleasure of our higher self, for our *ruh* loves to remember its home, the realm in which it came from. Death is the union between our soul and its Beloved. And just like our physical bodies love the mention of returning to our physical homes in this world after a tiresome journey, the soul loves the mention of its home as it tires of this lowly world. So, we need to constantly remind our *ruh* of its inevitable return home, but also the reminder of death is designed to preoccupy us with a greater concern, which is, "*What will be the state of my soul when it returns home?*" When death is a reality in our heart, the heart leads us to prepare for that reality. The heart leads the mind to direct its focus to what matters and to disconnect from what burdens it. The heart is more able to say no to the *nafs* when it is trying to get it to live as if there is no death. As a result, we become deeply awakened to what is truly meaningful in life, to what we actually have control over, to what we can change, to what we can maximize, and to how we can truly live up to our potential. You see, as human beings, we give value to what is temporary. When we think something

222 *Sunan Ibn Majah*, 4258 (Hasan Darussalam).

223 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, 6439.

lasts forever, we take it for granted. This is why there is nothing more valuable than life, and that is because it is so temporary. But we often get distracted from this truth, even though it is an obvious reality.

Our constant connection to the temporary nature of our life only serves us. Even existential psychology recognizes this. It teaches that the root of people's anxiety or distress is that they have not come to terms with the temporariness of their life. This is a known psychological view that we struggle when we are disconnected from the reality death. This struggle is referred to as *death anxiety*, and it is known to occur when we deny the inevitable truth of death or fail to confront the temporariness or limitations of life.[224] Existential psychology also recognizes that when people connect deeply to the fact that their life is temporary, they begin to maximize their life and potential. They become happier and more positive. They are so much more present in the here and now, and therefore their present comes to life. An example that is often given to reflect this truth is when someone receives the news of a fatal illness and that they only have a few months to live. This person will often become sharply attuned to what truly matters and all the ways they haven't been actually living and maximizing their life. They will start spending their wealth on what is valuable and meaningful to them. They will not want to waste any time. They will want to do things they put on hold. They will stop limiting their potential. Whereas, when a person thinks they will live till they reach old age, they might put off things that are meaningful to them. They might not maximize their potential. And even if they do reach old age, they might then find themselves deeply regretful of the life they didn't live and maximize.

The reminder of death – and all the truths we are given in Islam about the reality of this temporary journey in this world and the inevitable journey in the eternal world that awaits us – is a great blessing. Remembering death motivates us to *truly* live and to live meaningfully, and maximize what we are given *today*.

> "*People, be mindful of your Lord and fear a day when no parent will take the place of their child, nor a child take the place of their parent, in any way. Allah's (God's) promise is true, so do not let the present life delude you, nor let the Deceiver delude you about Allah (God). Knowledge of the Hour (of Resurrection) belongs to Allah (God); it is He who sends down the relieving rain and He who knows what is hidden in the womb. No soul knows what it will reap tomorrow, and no soul knows in what land it will die; it is Allah (God) who is all knowing and all aware.*" (Qur'an, 31:33-34)

> Ibn Omar (ﷺ) said, "*If you survive till the evening, do not expect to be alive in the morning, and if you survive till the morning, do not expect to*

224 Breitbart W. (2017).

be alive in the evening, and take from your health for your sickness, and (take) from your life for your death."[225]

Learn to Ask Meaning-Driven Questions

In every experience we go through, easy or difficult, happy or sad, the questions we *ask* shape how we interact with those experiences and our connection to the underlying meaning and value within those experiences. Many times, when we are struggling and find ourselves stuck, and unable to see any meaning, beauty, or value in our experiences, especially our struggles, it is because we are asking the wrong questions. The questions we ask through our struggles determine whether the pain we feel through the test will be followed by growth, healing, and greater peace, or be followed by greater pain, stagnation, or worse, suffering.

For example, when a calamity hits, many people ask "what if I had done this or that?," and this question creates great distress, because it attaches you to the illusion that you actually had power over what God decrees (*qadr*). This is why Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us: "*If any adversity comes to you do not say: 'If I had only acted in such-and-such a way, it would have been such-and-such'; but instead, say: 'Allah (God) has decreed (it) and what He willed, He has done,' for verily, (the word) "If" opens the way for the work of Satan.*"[226]

Another example of an unhelpful question that many people ask during difficult times is, "*Why me?*" When we ask this question, we are making a choice to view our situation in a way that actually harms us. "*Why me?*" causes a person to see themselves as a victim, as a receiver of harm, and not a receiver of benefit and value. This means that they view the test as there to only hurt them, to rob them of something, to oppress them, to leave them abandoned, or to leave them void of something great. And worse of all, they may view God being the One doing this to them – the One hurting them. Asking "*Why me?*" leads to resentment and anger, oftentimes towards anyone they perceive to play a role in this hurt, but also towards God. By asking, "*Why me? Why is this happening? Why is God punishing me?*," a person is viewing God as One who intends harm rather than One who intends good. But when we ask more elevated and meaning-driven questions, like "*What is God teaching me through this struggle? What is God giving me through this test? What is God setting me up to receive through this pain? How is God molding me and raising me through this difficulty? What is God doing for me in the realm that is unseen yet very real and true?*," we begin to view our tests and struggles as experiences that hold great

225 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, 6416.

226 *Sunan Ibn Majah*, 79 (Sahīh Darussalam).

value and benefit for us, not harm. Instead of playing the role of victim or passive and helpless receiver of the test, we begin to play a proactive, powerful, and helpful role in interacting with the struggle. Above all, our mind starts to collect the information about the test that will serve the heart. The mind starts to pay attention to the meaning, benefit, and possible opportunities the test has to offer us. As a result, the heart becomes deeply connected to greater meaning or "truths of significance." But even if the mind is unable to collect beneficial information about the test, the heart can guide it. When we ask the right questions, we direct the heart to see God and His truths, even if the mind cannot comprehend them.

Remember, the heart, when in the lead, has the power to guide the mind, its servant. But if we are leading from the mind, we will only see what the mind brings back to us – only the information that our senses have collected from the experience, what our physical eyes have seen, what our ears have heard, what our tongues have said. If we lead from the *nafs*, the *nafs* will start producing the "*woe is me*" narrative that breeds resentment and anger towards anyone (including God) who it perceives to be the cause of its discomfort. But when the heart is the lead, it searches for truth, meaning, and value. When the heart is the lead, it reflects the core beliefs of the *ruh*, and the *ruh* only believes and thinks good about God and the role He plays in our life. The *ruh*, our higher and sacred self, knows that God wants good for us, that He only does what serves us in this world and the next, and He only tests us to show us greater truths we need to thrive. The *ruh* knows that all tests are rooted in God's love. As Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us: "*The greatest reward comes with the greatest trial. When Allah (God) loves a people He tests them. Whoever accepts that wins His pleasure but whoever is discontent with that earns His wrath.*"[227]

See the Greater Light that Darkness Points You To

Darkness is designed to point us to light. It is what sharpens our ability to detect light. Think about this, if you are on a dark path in the forest, would you miss the sight of a small cabin down the road with its lights turned on? You would be able to see the lit cabin very clearly because you are surrounded by darkness. You might be able to even see the people in the cabin through the windows, but because they are in a lit room, they would most likely not be able to see you. What light contains within it becomes easily seen by someone enveloped in darkness, but what the darkness contains within it cannot be easily seen by someone enveloped in light. This is the mercy of God. He made light and the truth it highlights easily detected and noticed. And He blinds

227 *Sunan Ibn Majah,* 4031 (Hasan Darussalam).

us from seeing what darkness contains when we are enveloped by the blessing of light. This is the power of light. It illuminates. It points us to truth. It disconnects us from the harms that exist in darkness. And it only allows us to see what light contains.

So, it is not a coincidence that it is our most challenging, difficult, and darkest times in life that will direct us to the greatest truths we need. Through our darkest times, we see light more clearly and all the truth it brings with it – the truth of our mind, hearts, beliefs, values, goals – and even the reality of our relationships with God, ourselves, and our loved ones. That is the purpose of darkness (and our tests in life): to direct us to illumination and truth, and it gives us no choice but to let go of what is false, (i.e., beliefs, mindsets, relationships, etc.). It is what pushes us to hold on to what God told us is real and true and to begin living by those truths. In darkness, light becomes as clear as the stars or the moon in the dark night sky, or the break of dawn after the darkest of nights.

Darkness pushes us to search for light. But oftentimes, when we go through great difficulty in life or dark periods of our life, it can be so easy to fixate so relentlessly on a specific light, the light at the end of the dark tunnel. We ask, "*When will this test be over? When will I see the end of this struggle?*" We spend all our energy fixating on arriving at the end of the test – when the pain or struggle will be over, when the situation will be fixed, when our answers will be received, or when we can move on to the next phase of our journey – that we completely miss the the benefit of the test itself and the meaning it holds for us. We are so fixated on getting our answers that we miss all our lessons. We are so consumed with passing through the experience instead of *living* it. We become fixated on the destination, the light at the end of the tunnel that we hope to reach, rather than the journey itself, the tunnel itself, and the greater light it holds.

We don't want to focus on what the dark tunnel itself holds for us, because *Shaytan* has deceived us to think that the dark periods of our life, the difficult tests, the times of pain, have nothing to offer us, that the journey is bleak and has no light to offer us. So we try to escape the dark tunnel and fixate on the light at the end, thinking that is the *only* light to be reached. But the light at the end of the tunnel is not the only light God wants us to reach. There is a reason we go through dark periods. There is a reason God withholds the light at the end for a given period of time, where we don't see the open doors, the answers to our *dua*, a way out of our situation, or even any possible wisdom to explain the greater meaning behind a test. Sometimes, God veils us from the light at the end of the tunnel so that we can embrace the tunnel itself. For, when we accept the tunnel – the journey as it is, void of the light we are searching for at the end – we will possibly understand with every fiber of our

being what it means for God to be our main and only Source of light. When God veils our physical eyes from seeing the light at the end of our hardship, God opens our spiritual eyes (the eyes of our heart) to see a far loftier, greater, more nourishing, peaceful, healing, and freeing light. When God withholds the worldly light, He gives the heart an opportunity to witness Divine Light, *Al-Nur*, Himself. And we realize, it was never about the light our physical body was eager to reach, but the light our spiritual body so desperately needs to thrive in this lowly world. We realize our higher self has access to the Source of light Himself, and all we need to do is face the heart towards this higher self (by reminding the heart of God's truths), so it begins to reflect and benefit from that light.

And if we are able to come to such a state, where that light fills our hearts, and we are okay with not seeing the worldly light at the end, and instead become sufficed with God's light – the illumination of His closeness, His plan, His guidance, His words, and His truths – then we will come to know the greatest truth that the test came to relay to us, and that is: **God is enough for all our hearts**. When this happens, contentment (*rida*) decorates our hearts so powerfully and beautifully. As a result, God's light becomes enough. His truths become enough. His closeness becomes enough. His love becomes enough. His illumination of our inner world becomes enough, regardless of how dark our outer world is. When this happens, when the heart is illuminated by God's light, it illuminates our entire being like the full moon illuminates the darkest of nights.

Practice Being Fully Content with God

Being meaning-driven cultivates the most beautiful inner experiences and states, and amongst them is the best of those states, and that is *rida*. *Rida* is the practice and inner state of being fully pleased and content with God Himself, His decree, His plan, His truths, His love. *Rida* is one of the greatest nourishments of the heart. It is not just accepting God's will, but being actually at peace with it, knowing we are in the Best of hands and care.

Being meaning-driven means we look for the value of an experience. And a person who leads with their heart, and not their *nafs*, will look for value and not just comfort. When we lead from the heart, we become deeply certain that God holds for us value in every situation, and this in turn nurtures *rida* in our heart, where we become pleased with God and His decree through everything we go through. And when *rida* is nurtured in the heart, our *ruh* gains peace and tranquility, and it loses that peace and tranquility when the heart is void of *rida*. For *rida* is an essential quality and attribute of a tranquil soul, and this is reflected in the following verse of the Qur'an: "*O tranquil soul! Return to your Lord, well pleased (with Him) and well pleasing (to Him). So join My servants,*

and enter My paradise" (89:27-30). What we often miss about these verses is the part where God says, "*well pleased with Him.*" We often talk about a righteous servant or a tranquil soul as being one who only God is pleased with and not the other way around. In this verse, God is describing the righteous servants as ones who are "well-pleasing" to Him, but are also "well pleased" *with* Him. Essentially, He is describing those whose hearts have reflected and embodied the *ruh*'s attribute of *rida*. He is describing those beautiful people who have hearts that express deep contentment with *who, how, and what God is: who* God is in their life, *how* God interacts with them and plans for them, and *what* God has given and withheld from them in their life. Rida is a key trait of a believer. As Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) said: "*Wondrous is the affair of the believer for there is good for him in every matter and this is not the case with anyone except the believer. If he is happy, then he thanks Allah (God) and thus there is good for him, and if he is harmed, then he shows patience and thus there is good for him.*"[228]

When this happens, and our hearts have become so beautifully decorated with the sweetness of *rida*, we no longer become so fixated on escaping every test or struggle, but rather finding refuge in the greatness of God, His presence, His plan, His love, His mercy, and His knowledge of what is best for us. When *rida* is in the heart, God becomes enough for the heart in a way nothing else can. When *rida* is reflected in the heart, we become whole through God. It doesn't mean that we don't still feel the pains of our human experiences, but we understand that through the pain, we are gaining great value from God.

"*When we have nothing left but God, we discover that God is enough.*" — Rumi

Cultivate *Pearls of Resilience*

Resilience is the capacity of the human being to recover or spring back from struggles. This is how resilience is defined in the world of psychology *today*. But over 1400 years ago, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us this definition of resilience when he was describing the qualities of a believer. He said: "*The example of a believer is that of a fresh green plant, the leaves of which move in whatever direction the wind forces them to move and when the wind becomes still, it* ***stands straight****. Such is the similitude of the believer: He is disturbed by calamities (but is like the fresh plant he regains his normal state soon). And the example of a disbeliever is that of a pine tree (which remains) hard and straight till Allah cuts it down when He will.*"[229] This *hadith* not only teaches us that it's okay for hardships to cause disruption in our life, to keep us from standing strong and upright all the time, but it also teaches us that Islam – the practice

228 *Sahīh Muslim*, 2999.

229 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, 7466.

of submitting to God – creates great resilience, a great capacity to recover after hardship, not letting the hardships of the world break us or keep us from standing upright again. Throughout the Qur'an, God gives us great messages and stories of resilience. Through the stories of Yunus, Ya'kub, Yusuf, Musa, we see the greatest examples of resilience. And through the life of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), we see the greatest example of resilience and overcoming of the toughest of hardships and tests. It is through great meaning that Islam cultivates resilience in a believer.

We as human beings *need* meaning to recover and have the capacity to spring back. Cultivating resilience requires that we train our mind and heart to see what is happening *for* us and not against us during the test itself. It requires that we see every test as a molding of who we are, and not a harm to who we are. There are so many examples of this in nature. The greatest treasures are derived from pain, discomfort, pressure, and agitation. Diamonds are created from great pressure. Gold is the same. And even pearls come from great agitation. A pearl is formed from an irritating piece of material (such as a piece of sand) entering an oyster, mussel or clam. As a defense mechanism, the mollusk keeps secreting a fluid to coat the irritant. The mollusk continues to form layers upon layers of this coating, and as a result, we get a beautiful and valuable pearl. Did the mollusk know that a pearl would result from its hardship and struggle to try to remove it? No. All it knew initially was that it had to cope with the disturbance at hand. All it focused on was coping with the discomfort, its hardship. It didn't know what God was allowing it to create *through* that discomfort. Similarly, when we face our own discomforts, irritants, and struggles in life, we are often veiled from seeing what God is actually doing for us and how He is helping us gain a result and outcome far better than we even expected for ourselves, our own *pearls of resilience.*

Train Your Heart to See God's Molding of You

Islam teaches us that the test is there to serve us and mold us to be who God wants us to be. And that molding is rooted very deeply in God's love for us. This is a truth we learn very powerfully from the Qur'an. In *Surah Taha,*[230] God reminds Musa of His journey, and how God inspired his mother to put him into the river and for him to be taken by His enemy (Pharaoh). In the same verse immediately after, God then tells Musa: "*...And I bestowed upon you love from Me that you would be brought up under My eye.*"[231]

Musa was disconnected from his mother while he was an infant. He was disconnected from the human that would love him and care for him most in this world, but God did not leave him unloved nor uncared for. He essentially raised him, nurtured him, and molded him to be the man he was despite being under the roof of the worst of mankind, Pharaoh. God was always there. His

230 Chapter 20 of the Qur'an

231 Qur'an, 20:36-39.

love was always there. And He was molding Musa every step of the way. So, why does God speak of this conversation with Musa in the Qur'an? It is for *you and me*. It is for the reader, for every soul receiving these words. This verse is a mercy from God for any soul going through pain, tests, or struggles. He is reminding the reader that through our hardships, He is bestowing His love upon us. When we are tested, He, *Al-Wadud*, the Most Loving, never leaves us unloved nor uncared for. And that no matter how difficult our circumstances are, He is still in control, and molding us to be who we need to be. He is our "*rabb*," our Ultimate Caretaker, and on our journey back to Him, He is rearing us and raising us every step of the way under His watchful eye.

See What God is Freeing You From

Sometimes when we go through difficult times, all we see is the pain, but not what God is freeing us from. We don't see how the chains we bound ourselves to could only be broken during the very test that was custom-tailored for us to experience. We don't see that the pain we feel today sets us up to be *freer* tomorrow, and to have hearts that are lighter, more joyful, and more at peace.

What if the closed door in your life is freeing you from attaching your worth to what is behind that door? What if the person who has abandoned you was actually the very thing you needed to free yourself from seeking your wholeness and worth through them? What if others' negative opinion of you is actually what you needed to experience so you can free yourself from the mental and emotional stress of being bound to monitoring the opinions of others? What if your loss of status is what is freeing you from the chains of that status, that has left you a slave to constantly needing the praise of others? What if the lost friendships are actually freeing you to live up to your potential and become the person God wants you to be? What if the lost job opportunity frees you up to recognize new interests or new skills you want to utilize? What if the darkness you are in is pointing you to a greater light? What if the very test you hate is actually what came to set you FREE?

Key Practice Tip

Pause to reflect on a current difficulty or test in your life that you have been struggling to navigate. Perhaps it is time to ask different questions! Take some time to ask some of the meaning-driven questions provided in this chapter. Attempt to answer those questions. And then take some time to channel those questions into a *zikr*, a name of God, or *dua*. For example, for the meaning-driven question of "*What is God setting me up to receive through this pain?*", you can make the dua of "*Ya Allah, help me to grow and receive great rewards, blessings, and benefit from this test, not only in this world, but the next.*"

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Living By H.O.M.E.
Unlearning What is False & Learning What is True

As you learned so far on this journey, sacred authenticity and truthfulness (*sidq*) is essential to our journey of inner alignment, growth, and transformation. But we will only practice sacred authenticity if the heart is the lead and our *ruh* is our priority. If we are led by our *nafs*, we won't care to assess if we are speaking the truth, acting upon truth, or living truthfully, yet alone take the time to practice *taqwa* (God-consciousness) where we assess our truths in front of the All Seeing, All Hearing. Only when the heart is the lead will we prioritize God's watchfulness of us and we will be sensitive to our disconnect from truth. The heart cannot lead when it is conflicted, and inner conflict exists when what we claim to believe inwardly does not align with what we present outwardly, where our behaviors do not reflect what we claim to value. Many people lack peace because their inner world is a world of great conflict. It is a world of great misalignment, and a world void of wholeness. This conflict and misalignment speaks to a need for a greater connection to truth.

The heart seeks to be in line with God's truths. Unlike the *nafs* or ego which can be fueled and inflated in the absence of truth, the heart can only grow in the presence of truth. In fact, we can only positively change, grow, or transform on any level in the presence of truth. We cannot be benefited or freed by what is false. Islam is an entire way of life that is prescribed by God to free people from falsehood. The Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet (ﷺ) in a time in which people were imprisoned psychologically, socially, and spiritually by their attachment to what is false. Through Islam, we saw an entire nation at the time of the Prophet (ﷺ) transform completely and be freed from their false beliefs, false idols, and attachments to what is false. And then we saw how that same message spread like wildfire and transformed many hearts, tribes, and nations thereafter. Today, Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world, and that is because *truth* is easy to recognize when you seek it. Truth, unlike falsehood, stands out to the eye of our hearts like the break of dawn stands out to our physical eyes, after the darkest of nights.

Be a Truth Seeker

I believe we all come into this world truthful and whole. But this world has a way of adding on to us that which does not belong to us, and disconnecting us from God's truths, our need for Him, and from the immense opportunity we have to be whole through Him. Whether it is because of the influences of society, environment, traumas, experiences, people, or even our own interpretations and actions, we start to acquire layers and layers that are false and disconnect us from our innate truth (our *fitrah*). We then go on with our lives, unconscious of what we carry, unaware of our disconnect, *until* along the way, God places experiences and tests on our path that shake us, break us, and that cause us to fall apart and no longer be able to continue holding together the pieces of ourselves we have been carrying.

> The earth itself breaks too
> and even the deepest breaks
> still contribute to its roads and paths.[232]

And while we might only see the break, the pain, what we often miss is the potential and the divine purpose of the break. We don't recognize that it is *only* through the break – through the experience of falling apart, through our most difficult times – that all our pieces, both true and false, are presented to us very clearly, and we become sharply attuned to them, in a way we wouldn't be during times of ease. It is only *then* when we turn the eye of our heart to God that He unveils it to recognize what was never true, what was never ours, and what was never in line with His plan for us. And it is through this experience that God facilitates a sacred process that builds us back up beautifully, like a phoenix rising from the ashes, but unlike before the break, we now rise with only the pieces of ourselves that are true and will contribute to our wholeness and who He wants us to become. This is His way of connecting us back to our *fitrah* (innate true and natural state) throughout our lives, so that we may return to Him and leave this world just as we came into it: true, loved, and whole.

And this is why Islam teaches us that God tests those whom He loves, for the test is designed to connect us to truth, the truth of our faith, the truth of God, the truth of who we are, and the truth of our potential. This is exemplified in the following verses in the Qur'an: "*Do people think once they say, 'We believe,' that they will be left without being put to the test? We certainly tested those before them. And (in this way) Allah (God) will clearly* ***distinguish between those who are truthful and those who are liars***" (29:2-3). Without tests and trials, we would be left to walk this earth carrying the false layers

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we have acquired, and worse, being burdened by them. And it is because of God's love that He puts us through a test that allows for our truths to surface and our falsehood to be shed.

False layers are what keep us in destructive cycles and habits, and deprive us of a peaceful, loving, and whole environment within. To cultivate a beautiful home within and experience greater alignment, we need to return to sacred authenticity, wholeness, and a sacred form of self-love. Without them, we create an environment within that only the ego can thrive in, not the heart. But facing our truths is not always easy. One of the most uncomfortable things to do in life is to reevaluate and redefine our truths: the truth of who we are, our values, and who we want to be. And one of the hardest things to do in life is to commit to living that life and choosing to be authentic in front of ourselves and God over hiding behind "who we should be" simply because it's approved of by other people. It is very hard to step out of boxes that make us feel safe, especially when these boxes are decorated with the wrapping of "religiousness." We become scared to do anything that seems different than what people have defined "religiousness" and "piety" as looking like. Many times, people define religiousness and piety in a way that the Qur'an and the *sunnah* never did, and many people are stuck in a cycle of presenting a form of "religiousness" that was never taught by God, but just promoted within their culture or circles. On the other hand, many people also may be afraid to actually be more religious or closer to God, accept His invitation to truth, and follow what He did in fact call them to, out of fear of what people may think. This is also inauthenticity and a lack of truthfulness with oneself and God. But one of the most liberating things in life is choosing to live a life that, above all, is pleasing to God and is truthful, and knowing and believing deep in our heart that is *enough* for us to feel whole. When we are connected to our intentions, our core beliefs, and core values, when we stand by our choices, and when we live a life that is authentic in front of God and ourselves, we will be able to face anyone who disapproves even if they also decorate their disapproval with the most beautiful of wrappings.

Remember, never let other people's masks keep you from taking off yours. Shed what is false and commit yourself to living truthfully anyway, even if it makes others uncomfortable. The work of sacred authenticity and the resulting sacred self-love and wholeness we cultivate in our lives has everything to do with building the courage to take off the masks we have been wearing in our lives to give our *nafs* the false security it is comforted with. The *nafs* is the part of ourselves that cares about our image more than anything else. And as long as we present a likable image to people, it doesn't care what we hide or what mask we wear to achieve that. That is because the lower self (the *nafs*)

has lower standards. Our higher self (the *ruh*) has higher standards. It requires truth and will not accept anything false, for it comes from the most truthful realm, was made with truth, and knows it has to return with truth. To meet the standards of your higher self (*ruh*), you have to practice living truthfully with sacred authenticity, and that means you begin prioritizing truth in all your interactions, with God, with yourself, and with others. You begin asking yourself, "*Is what I am saying true?*" "*Is what I am doing aligned with my truthful beliefs and values? Is what I am presenting consistent with what I claim to believe?*" "*Am I trying to hide beyond a mask of perfection right now and why is it that I am hiding those parts of myself?*"

Sacred authenticity requires that you begin viewing your agitations and unhelpful reactions as teachers. Whether it is confusion, distress, frustration, or helplessness that you feel, your remedy lies in connecting to truth. The saying "*the truth will set you free*" is way too understated but it hits the nail on the head. Your most unhelpful reactions to circumstances and your most intense internal agitations usually point to some type of truth you are disconnected from, whether it is the truth of your beliefs, thought patterns, the truth of your emotions, the truth about yourself, or even the truth about your experiences. Your connection to truth becomes the doorway and the means to your healing, clarity, peace, and liberation. And when you realize this – that connecting to truth is the path to those things – you will take every emotional agitation, every distress, and every frustration, to *Al-Haqq*, the Creator of all truth and all reality we seek, internal and external. Because while connecting to truth is the path, He is the Ultimate Destination and the Source of all truth, and so only *He* can pave the way.

Be Truthful With Yourself

Sacred authenticity requires that we are truthful with ourselves. One has to first be honest with oneself before they can claim to be honest with God and others. We need to prioritize honesty with ourselves as we prioritize it with others. When we lie to someone, we betray their trust in us, and we universally understand lying is not okay and an act of immorality. It is the same when we lie to ourselves, but many of us do not take the time to cultivate the same trust with ourselves that we do with others. Every time we are not truthful and honest with ourselves about our values, struggles, challenges, beliefs, feelings, and actions, we betray our own sense of trust with ourselves. Every time we break a promise we made to ourselves, we start to trust ourselves less and become even less confident that we will honor our future promises and goals. And every time we tell ourselves a lie so our *nafs* (or ego) can feel good, to avoid the pain of facing our truths, we create a greater disconnect between us and our own heart. In the end, this disconnect leaves us feeling

less grounded, malnourished, and more dependent on what is external for our joy, peace, validation, and security. But when we prioritize truthfulness with ourselves, our inner home becomes strengthened and beautified, as it becomes swept of what is false.

Being truthful and authentic does not mean we only accept the parts of ourselves that we like or will be approved of by others. It is accepting the "*good, bad, and ugly*," for we cannot change what we do not accept. I think one of the hardest things in life is to accept ourselves and all that we are experiencing. And I believe this is because many people think acceptance means we will get comfortable and never change or improve. But that's not true. Acceptance is a necessary ingredient of change and improvement. Without it, we actually *cannot* grow. Acceptance allows us to stop denying ourselves, our truth, our internal experience, or the reality of our circumstances. Acceptance is when we simply say, "*Yes, this is true about me*," "*Yes, I need to improve in this area*," "*Yes, I think this*," "*Yes, I feel this*," "*Yes, I hope for this*," "*Yes, I fear this*," "*Yes, I struggle with this*," "*Yes, I went through this*," or "*Yes, this is the reality of what I am experiencing.*" Acceptance is acknowledging the reality of something even if we don't like it, even if we want to change it. Acceptance simply allows us to lean into truth, to what is real. Without doing so, we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to change, grow, heal, and improve.

To accept something, we have to acknowledge its existence. The opposite of that is denial, and that is to reject what exists within you. Therefore, without acceptance, we are rejecting ourselves. And when we reject ourselves, we will only trigger shame to arise within us and in turn, we will walk on earth fearing the rejection and judgements of others. We will give others a power they don't deserve. What you deny within yourself will always be what you can't stand others pointing out about you. What you reject about yourself, you will also reject when others see it too. And what you accept about yourself, you will not care if others see it. You will remain calm, grounded, and secure, for you will not be shaken by what others say about you, especially, when you know it is not consistent with what you already know about yourself. As Sufyan al-Thawri (ﷺ) once said, "*If you know yourself, you will not be harmed by whatever is said about you.*"[233] This is why once you start prioritizing and accepting your truths, you not only set yourself up to grow, but you also take your power back from those who don't deserve it. You liberate yourself from the opinion and judgments of others, and your heart then becomes more free and open to receive what it needs to empower your spiritual, mental, and emotional growth. Above all, when we accept our truths as they are, shame has no reason to come up and keep us from change. Instead, we actually set ourselves up to

233 Ḥilyat al-Awliyā', 6/390.

now take the truths we have accepted about ourselves and begin filtering them through a God-centered lens, where we assess which of these truths serve our *ruh*'s path back to God, or do not serve it at all.

This is not an easy process, and why I always say healing and therapy is not for the weak. When people go to therapy or begin doing the work of assessing their truths, it can be very hard. One will face great resistance from their ego (or *nafs*), because the ego does not want its comfort disturbed by our difficult truths. The *nafs* is completely secure living in the comforts of the falsehoods we are attached to. It takes courage to face what we do not like about ourselves, and sometimes to even embrace what we *do* like about ourselves. But once we can face our fears and strengthen the muscle of courage, we will recognize that the many fruits to gain from practicing acceptance of our truths, are worth the effort.

Face the Truths You Hide: *Nafs*-Work is Shadow-Work

The path to sacred authenticity and subsequent sacred self-love requires that we face the parts of ourselves we hide because we have deemed them unlovable, unworthy, or not beautiful. This part that many people hide is called the "shadow" in Jungian Analytical Psychology, which was based on the theories of Carl Jung. While I am critical of several of Jung's teachings and spent years filtering a lot of his work and the work of many Western psychologists through an Islamic framework, I found truths in some of his teachings about the shadow to align with the role of the *nafs* in Islamic teachings and truths I witnessed in my work with others.

Carl Jung used the term "shadow" to refer to the dark side of our human psyche that we keep hidden. It is the parts of ourselves that we have deemed dark and unworthy of being in the light. To understand this, let's first connect to the meaning of a real shadow. A shadow is the dark shape or figure that can be seen when our body comes between the light of the sun and a surface. When the sun is facing us, and we are standing near a wall or the ground, a dark figure outlining our body will show up on the wall or ground we are near. This is the shadow.

In relation to the H.O.M.E. Method, we can compare the *nafs* to the surface or wall that reflects the shadow, the heart can be compared to the object standing between the sun and the surface, and once again we can relate the *ruh* to the sun, for the sake of understanding the shadow in psycho-spiritual terms. The shadow is the dark parts of us that show up when we block the light of the *ruh*. When light is blocked, a shadow appears. When the light of the *ruh* is blocked due to the *nafs*'s impact on the heart or due to the heart facing

the *nafs*, the dark parts of ourselves start to develop. But should we hate the shadow? Should we hate the dark parts of ourselves that develop when we face our heart in the wrong direction? This was a question I had along my path when I would hear teachings that told me to hate my *nafs*. It made me think, how can I hate something God put within me? And how can I change something I hate? The more I did my own inner work, I felt like my *nafs* was very similar to a child, and the more I hated it, the more toxic shame grew within me and actually kept me from changing what I did not like to see within myself and my actions. But when I learned to view my *nafs* with the same compassion as I would view a child who makes a mistake, I began to grow. This is what generated the belief within me that nothing can grow in the absence of mercy and the presence of hate. I also understood that there is a difference between hating an action that God hates, and still *not* hating myself or a part of myself that God has put within me.

We will always be imperfect. What matters to God is our heart, efforts, and our persistence to continue sincerely striving towards Him. God created us with a *nafs* in this world, and I believe we should not hate this part within ourselves, nor should we devote ourselves to it or be led by it and approve of everything it influences us to follow. Between the two extremes of hate and blind devotion, there is mercy, acceptance, assertiveness, and proactive effort to change what we do not like. The *nafs* is there to teach us, too, for we learn through opposites. We learn about the day because of the night, and we understand the true meaning of peace and joy more deeply when we experience pain. Similarly, we understand the sweetness and peace of living from our higher self (the *ruh*) after experiencing the chaos of living from our lower self (the *nafs*). Through the different turnings of our heart, from the facing of the heart towards the lower self and back to the higher self, God shows us our truths, not so we can hate ourselves, but so we can learn from the opposing experiences and change what does not serve us.

But we need to face our shadow. We need to face the dark parts of our *nafs* and also the parts of ourselves that may not necessarily be a negative part of our *nafs* but a personal trait that the *nafs* works to hide, because we have labeled it as dark. Carl Jung describes the shadow as an unconscious part of our personality that does not align with our ego's ideal. The ego's ideal is that perfect image we form of who we think we *should* be, or should present outwardly so that we are accepted and in line with the standards of others or society. According to Jung and other analytical psychologists, the ego is what regulates between the id – our basic instinctual desires and needs – and the superego (the ideal version of who we should be). When the ego sees something that doesn't match the ideal image, it hides it behind a mask.

The shadow may have parts that are not dark at all. The shadow can simply be the pieces of ourselves we refuse to acknowledge, face, and integrate into our whole identity, because we were taught through our upbringing, unhealthy messages from our caregivers, or through traumas and abuse that there are parts of us that are not lovable, beautiful, or worthy. Through my work with many people over the years, I have seen parts of people's shadow be actually quite beautiful. I have seen people hide beautiful parts of themselves behind a mask, because they view it or were taught to view it as ugly. Worse of all, they were wrongfully taught that aspects of themselves (normal differences and personality traits) were not acceptable due to cultural beliefs or wrong ideas about what a Muslim person has to be like.

When the shadow or dark parts of ourselves reveal themselves to us, we should acknowledge them, identify them, and accept them, but not reject them, for we cannot have a true influence on anything we reject or deny within ourselves. If we keep rejecting what we don't like about ourselves, we are living with the notion that we should be perfect, and living with the denial of any imperfection within us. Denial, in turn, can have a detrimental impact on our psycho-spiritual health and can promote an inner experience of arrogance and the need to be superior to others to mask what we deem imperfect. This is where the relationship between the *nafs* and the shadow is seen so clearly. What we deem dark and ugly about ourselves, the *nafs* (or ego) will try to mask and hide away, to present a "perfect" image to the world. This is why I say *nafs*-work is shadow-work, because the more we do the work to oppose our *nafs* (our lower self), the more we will have to face what it is trying to hide behind a mask. *Nafs*-work (simultaneously with heart-work, the work of purifying and leading from our heart), is the work of prioritizing truth, sacred authenticity, and the need to face all the parts of ourselves, so that we are not guided or influenced by what is hidden.

What we do not face controls us. What we hide still influences our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. For example, a person can hide a need they have to feel loved because they were always taught growing up that they were *too much*, unlovable, and weren't allowed to have needs. This is often seen in the adult children of narcissistic parents. They oftentimes struggle with codependency and have a hard time actually acknowledging, let alone communicating, that they have a need in their relationships, due to growing up with a narcissist who chronically neglected their needs. This person will then hide their needs and view them in a negative light. Their needs become hidden behind the mask of "*I do not need anybody*," or "*I am too much for anyone*" and this is why it is very hard for them to be vulnerable and actually acknowledge they need someone. And when someone comes along and does acknowledge the needs

they hide behind a mask, they may feel quite exposed and unsafe, and try to mask that vulnerability with an image of strength, false perfection, or isolate themselves. Another example is a person who was always told that they are too talkative and their expression of themselves was always viewed in a negative light. They grow up trying to hide this quality they deemed ugly. Their *nafs* or ego does whatever it takes to hide this quality, influencing the person to withhold expressing themselves, or not speak up, so that they do not appear as talkative or do not receive criticism for what they deem unlovable.

In both examples, the hiding of qualities that each person deemed ugly or unlovable, still influences their behavior, relationships, and oftentimes keeps out a lot of good. For the same walls the *nafs* or ego builds to protect its image and security, and to keep out harm, become the same walls that also keep out a lot of nourishment for the heart, and that can also harm us, because we all need love, connection, and to be seen for who we are. So again, what we hide and reject within ourselves, has greater power over us than when we face them. And God forbid someone comes along and says something that points out the very quality we are actually working so hard to hide. The ego will immediately come to the surface and take the lead, to secure the hiding of what we deem imperfect. We end up becoming reactive because, in those moments, we are rejecting ourselves. And rejection of any form hurts so very deeply.

Because the ego will always come up to the surface to immediately hide what we have identified as unlovable, ugly, or dark, the more we are truthful with ourselves, accept ourselves, and love ourselves, we give the ego less reason to come to the surface and lead us. I hope you are seeing the great and deep relationship between sacred authenticity, sacred self-love, and wholeness. Without the prioritization of truth, we cannot experience true acceptance and sincere love of who we are. And if we do not accept our truths, we cannot begin to integrate the necessary pieces of ourselves into a whole. This means that we live from fragmented pieces of ourselves, rather than an integrated whole of all the pieces of ourselves that we have examined and selected.

My work with others over the years on helping them live with greater sacred authenticity, sacred self-love, and wholeness, oftentimes involved facilitating a process where they can face what they deem ugly and dark, renew the lens in which they view those pieces, and then begin redefining those pieces in a more compassionate, pleasant, and truthful light.

Understanding Core Beliefs & Core Values

Our psycho-spiritual transformation and alignment requires that we identify, evaluate, and transform our core beliefs and core values. When it comes to living with sacred authenticity (*sidq*) and engaging in the removal

and beautification process of *tazkiyah*, we have to work to shed the beliefs and values that do not serve the heart's purification, and our alignment with our higher self, while also working to replace those beliefs and values with ones that are more truthful, helpful, and beautify our heart and being.

Positive growth
and transformation
is not so much about learning
as it is about *unlearning*
all that we thought was true.[234]

First, let's define core beliefs. In psychology, core beliefs are the deeply rooted beliefs that make up our holistic worldview, which includes our perception of ourselves, others, the world, and even God. They are the beliefs people develop and hold on to consistently throughout their life. These beliefs are not always truthful, within reason, or rooted in any real evidence, but regardless of their truth, they play a key role in our reactions and choices. According to Cognitive Behavioral Psychology, core beliefs are the underlying beliefs that motivate the automatic thoughts we have. Automatic thoughts are your more surface and immediate thoughts you have in reaction to what you witness and experience. For example, if you have an underlying core belief of "*I am always a failure,*" then an automatic thought in reaction to you not getting a job you applied to might be, "*I am not surprised I failed. Why did I even apply?*" This can lead to a person feeling depressed or hopeless, which then motivates the behaviors they engage in afterwards (to soothe the difficult emotions). These automatic thoughts that we have in reaction to our various interactions and experiences are rooted in our core beliefs, the hidden beliefs that were formed and fixed firmly over time, and as a result, guide our thoughts and actions day in and day out without us even realizing. That is because what is hidden from our awareness usually has more power over us. We can't control or change what we don't see.

Many people are unaware of the core beliefs guiding their holistic worldview. And as a result, they are heavily influenced by them each day. When our core beliefs are left unchecked, they can lead to reactions, habits and behaviors that are unhelpful, toxic, and do not promote our inner freedom and growth. Therefore, it makes it essential for us to address them when discussing and cultivating psycho-spiritual practices like living authentically and removing unhelpful habits and behaviors from our life through the psycho-spiritual process of *tazkiyah*). In fact, I find that people may find it hard to practice *tazkiyah* and transform unhealthy reactions and behaviors, because they are

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doing the spiritual work in separation of the psychological work, which requires assessing the psychological roots of our core beliefs and values. As you learned, *tazkiyah* and all practices you are learning through the H.O.M.E. Method, are holistic experiences that require us to not only work on our hearts, but also our minds and *nafs*, and their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral output.

Now, let's define core values. Core values are what you deem important in your life, the things you judge to be of *value* in your life (i.e., God-centered living, loyalty, authenticity, eating healthy, etc.). Your core values, like your core beliefs, also shape your thoughts, emotions and behaviors. Identifying them and evaluating them can help you recognize what has been guiding your actions and choices in life.

Both our core beliefs and core values are shaped by many things: the messages you received about God, yourself, the world throughout your life, but especially throughout your childhood and formative years. They are also shaped by the messages you received about what is *important* in life. For example, if you grew up in a family that prioritized appearing perfect or presenting a flawless image in front of others, then presenting a perfect image to the external world might be a core value you learned or subconsciously adopted. Your core beliefs and core values are also a result of how you interpreted your experiences based on the knowledge, messages, and feedback you had received at the time. For example, maybe you have a core belief that you are not capable of being successful, because you failed several times at a goal. You interpreted those failures to mean you are not capable of future success. But this interpretation could also be rooted in messages or information you absorbed in your childhood from your caregivers about your abilities, your skills, and your potential, or even feedback you received when you failed.

Unlearning Harmful Core Beliefs & Core Values

People can have all kinds of unhealthy core beliefs and core values that impact how they carry themselves in the world, interact with others, function in relationships, strive towards their goals, take on a new project, or even how they strive towards God. Examples of harmful core values are dishonesty, perfectionism, over-indulgence, always being liked (or approved of), attention-seeking, superiority, manipulation, control, victimhood, and always feeling good. Our values are what we live by, and if one lives by harmful values such as these, they will see the negative impact of them on their psychological health, spiritual health, relationships, and lifestyle. The same is true for core beliefs. Examples of common harmful core beliefs that one can have about themselves are: "*I am unlovable*," "*I am a loser*," "*I am not worthy of good things happening to me*," "*Nothing ever goes well in my life*," "*I am a bad person*,"

"*I will end up alone*," "*The world is always unsafe*," "*I am not someone who fits in*." Examples of unhealthy core beliefs about God can be: "*God is always ready to punish me*," "*God hates me*," "*God only does good for others but not for me*," "*God is only to be feared and not loved*," "*God is only there for me when I am perfect*," or "*What God gives me is conditional upon my perfection*." Many people have a very unhealthy perception of who God is, a *God-image* that is not rooted in what He has actually said.

When we do not work on assessing our core beliefs and transforming them into healthier and more truthful ones, we will struggle on not just a spiritual level, but on a psychological level as well. Unhealthy or harmful core beliefs have psychological consequences such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and substance abuse. But they also have spiritual consequences in that they can taint our perception of God (our God-image), interfere with the purification of our heart (*tazkiyah*), and can create great psychological barriers to our spiritual peace and growth.

The good news is, you can change your core beliefs and core values not only by unlearning harmful ones, but by doing the necessary psycho-spiritual work. As I keep emphasizing throughout this book, our psychological inner work cannot occur in separation of our spiritual inner work. It is all linked, and both the psychological and spiritual work we do impact each other. For example, sometimes our core beliefs can hinder us from having healthy relationships with others, where we become reactive and express our anger in a way that is not pleasing to God and is hurtful towards others. Adjusting our core beliefs can help us react better in ways that are pleasing to Him as well as beneficial to our relationships. Another example is that there may be core beliefs that keep you from fully submitting to God. For example, you may have a core belief that if you get closer to God, you will experience more pain in your life. This could be rooted in past experiences where you became closer to God and then were tested with something difficult that caused you great pain. Your interpretation of that experience then became: "*Closeness to God creates more pain in my life*." This core belief then shapes how you walk towards God and contributes to your fear of becoming closer to Him again and fully submitting to Him. If you can explore and adjust that belief, it can remove a huge barrier between you and God.

As we work to identify the pieces within that aren't true and the values and needs that aren't aligned with us anymore and our path to God, we start to unlearn all that is false, and we become like a butterfly shedding its cocoon or like a tree shedding its dead leaves, preparing itself for its renewal. And you must know that this renewal impacts all areas of our life, and both our spiritual and psychological experiences, for everything is connected. Therefore, we must

learn the psychological knowledge and tools that can help us unlearn and replace negative core beliefs and values, but most importantly, we must first learn and root ourselves in the spiritual and sacred knowledge and guidance that God sent us, for through the teachings of Islam, He offers us a way to learn who we are, who He is to us, and how to view our life, our purpose, our experiences and path in this world.

Your healing
Your liberation
is not so much
about learning
as it is about
unlearning all
that you thought
was true.[235]

Root Yourself in the Most Sacred Worldview

As mentioned, core beliefs are often referred to as a person's worldview. Well, Islam itself is a worldview of its own. It is the monotheistic worldview, the worldview of *tawheed*, that teaches us to center our beliefs and values around the oneness of God. This means that God is the priority, the One everything points to, and the One we want our values and perceptions of ourselves, others, and the world to be aligned with. Therefore, transforming our core beliefs and core values through the H.O.M.E. Method requires that we reorient our inner compass to God so that it leads our inner world beautifully, and its beliefs and values become aligned with the sacred worldview of the *ruh*. When this happens, the core beliefs and values of the higher self begin to override the harmful and unhelpful core beliefs of our lower self (the *nafs*) or the harmful and unhelpful beliefs we blindly accept when we lead from the mind.

So, the work of unlearning harmful core beliefs and values requires us to first root ourselves in the foundational and sacred worldview that God taught us to have. Everything starts with *tawheed*. When God is our Center, our Highest Value, and we train ourselves to view everything through Him, we begin to view ourselves, others, the world, and even God Himself differently. Our God-image becomes rectified, and so does our self-image and image of others and the world.

Islam teaches us a set of core beliefs and values designed to guide our worldview, reactions, choices, and behaviors. For example, in contrast to

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the harmful core values I mentioned earlier, Islam teaches us healthy core values, such as: humility not superiority, honesty not dishonesty, prioritizing doing what is good not always *feeling* good, sincere effort and truthfulness *not* perfectionism, God always approving not people always approving, sincerity (*ikhlaas*) not manipulation, trust in God (*tawakul*) not excessive control, restraint and balance (*tawazun*) not overindulgence, personal responsibility and accountability (*muhasaba*) not victimhood, seeking honor through God (*izza*) not seeking honor or self (or ego)-importance through other people. Throughout the Qur'an and *sunnah*, God teaches us the necessary sacred core values and core beliefs that, if lived by and embodied throughout our journey in this world, will honor us, elevate us, and provide us with great peace, alignment, and growth. For example, throughout the Qur'an, God gives us examples of core values and attributes such as patience, truthfulness, being giving or charitable, humility, obedience, and asking for forgiveness, that are embodied by believers, those who are truly living by the sacred worldview of *tawheed* and *la illah ila Allah* (there is no god but God). This is exemplified in the following verse: "*(They are) patient and truthful, obedient and charitable, and they plead for (Allah's) forgiveness before dawn*" (Qur'an, 3:17).

As human beings, we forget we need God's truths and we forget we need Him to shape our worldview. We get deluded into believing that we can process, interpret, and make sense of our external and internal world through ourselves. As a result, we fall short, and our fears, anxieties, and worries lead us to connecting to all the negativity around us, to forming harmful core beliefs, or worse, it leads us right into the traps of *Shaytan* (Satan), whose very aim is to get us to lose direction, stability, or lose the most important tool of all: hope. It is very easy to allow our fears and worries to drive us towards believing what *Shaytan* threatens us with, over what God has promised us over and over again throughout the Qur'an. God is constantly calling us to positivity, hope, blessings and He warns us of Satan's attempts to threaten us with poverty. God says in the Qur'an, "*Ash-shaytan (The all-vicious, the Devil) threatens you with poverty and commands you to obscenity; and Allah (God) promises you forgiveness from Him, and Grace; and Allah (God) is Ever-Embracing Ever-Knowing*" (2:268).

Poverty is not just confined to a loss of wealth. Poverty is a state of loss in all areas of our lives. It is a state of inferiority, insufficiency, insecurity, and that can be on a mental, emotional, physical, social, or spiritual level. While God promises us of His mercy, help, and grace that fills our life with peace and hope, *Shaytan*, knowing how powerful that is, will work hard to threaten us with the illusion of poverty, all the negative scenarios that reflect how much we can lose if we decide to connect to God's promises, feel hopeful,

embrace positivity, and see the good in the world. This false promise of Satan leaves people feeling helpless, hopeless, unproductive in their lives, and not moving forward.

But remember, while God makes promises, Shaytan only makes threats, and threats hold no weight compared to God's promises. And, our internal and external reality will only reflect that which we are more connected to. The more we connect to God's words, His promises, His truths, and hold on more firmly to that over anything else, then the lens in which we view ourselves, experiences, and the world changes. It becomes a lens in which God holds, adjusts, and guides so that we can see reality and not illusion, so that our hearts are able to decipher between what is true and false. In essence, God becomes our sight and hearing. As Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) said, "*Verily Allah (God) has said: ... 'And My servant does not draw near to Me with anything more loved to Me than the religious duties I have obligated upon him. And My servant continues to draw near to me with nafil (supererogatory) deeds until I Love him. When I Love him (my servant),* ***I am his hearing with which he hears, and his sight with which he sees, and his hand with which he strikes, and his foot with which he walks.*** *Were he to ask (something) of Me, I would surely give it to him; and were he to seek refuge with Me, I would surely grant him refuge.*"[236]

Everytime, we turn to God, root ourselves in what He has promised us through the Qur'an and *sunnah*, and become obedient to Him and what He called us to, He guides our sight, hearing, and actions. Our worldview then becomes transformed. But every time we feed into the illusions of Shaytan and his traps and threats, our worldview becomes distorted and tainted, and as a result, our fears, worries, misalignment, and distress only increase.

When we begin to hold God's words and teachings as a priority, we become more disconnected from illusion and God lifts the veils between our hearts and reality, so we are more able to witness the essential truths about Him, our circumstances, ourselves, and the world we live in. By taking steps to understand and most importantly *live* by the Qur'an and *sunnah*, we can begin rooting ourselves in loftier core beliefs and core values. This rooting then allows us to have a foundation that aids us in shaping or transforming other harmful perceptions we learned to form throughout our life. And as truthful and more sacred core beliefs and values begin to firmly settle within our hearts, it becomes purified of untruthful ones that existed within it before. This is the power of truth. Once it enters any space, falsehood ceases to exist, just like the darkness of night starts to fade away the second a glimpse of sunlight appears in the skies. The more God's truths are in our heart, the less room there is for the falsehood we and *Shaytan* deceived it to believe.

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236 Hadith 38, 40 Hadith an-Nawawi.

Do the work of Identifying Your Core Beliefs & Values

The psycho-spiritual work of unlearning harmful core beliefs and values is rooted in the spiritual work of connecting with our sacred worldview and filling the heart with God's truths, but this work and its growth has to be supported and nurtured through the psychological work of identifying our core beliefs and values and their interactions with the inner facets and entities within our psycho-spiritual system. This work is spiritual – but it is also mental, emotional, and behavioral work as well.

Take a moment to think of psychological or spiritual obstacles in your life keeping you from a specific goal or from being who you want to be. Think of the areas in your life you are not happy with and haven't had success in improving or transforming those areas. Maybe it is your relationship with God, perhaps returning to a level of prayer and *zikr* that you used to engage in years ago before struggles knocked on your door. Maybe it is health goals, like shedding the excess physical weight that is keeping you from having the energy you need to thrive in all areas of your life. Whatever area you have been wanting to transform, know that when we are stuck, feel defeated, constantly engaging in self-sabotaging behaviors – and unable to break through a cycle of unhelpful behaviors or achieve a goal we have consistently failed at progressing towards – it becomes clear that there is a key area we need to turn our attention to: our underlying core beliefs and core values.

But many times, when people are stuck, they neglect to look beyond the surface. They end up blaming superficial factors such as the circumstances, other people, or they end up blaming themselves in unhelpful ways such as calling themselves "lazy," or "having no will power," when the issue is much deeper. Let me give you an example. I was working with a student once who was struggling with improving the quality of his acts of worship. He found himself feeling like he was on cruise control, going through the motions in his prayers, and walking away feeling like he wasn't present and therefore not nourished. He said that he missed how engaged he was in prayer and in his acts of worship a couple of years ago. He described his past relationship with God to be one of great presence and fulfillment, but something changed along the way. He was attributing this to his lack of willpower, laziness, and lack of faith (*iman*), which is very common. People will often chalk up their spiritual struggles to a lack of faith without assessing what is happening on a psychological level. In exploring the situation further with this student, I asked him a question: *"During that time when you were very close to God, were you making a specific dua that you were expecting Him to fulfill?"* He paused and then said, *"Yes, I was actually praying for a specific thing and I did everything right at that time. I prayed more, did more zikr, prioritized God, and my dua went unanswered."*

And there it was, the underlying and hidden core belief: "My trust in God is conditional upon Him answering my *dua when* I want Him to answer it." I cannot begin to tell you how often we make the mistake of adopting this core belief, but worse, leaving it unchecked. I explained to my student that the reason he hasn't been present with God as he used to be – and therefore unfilled in his spiritual practices – is because of this core belief that tied his trust in God to Him answering his *dua* by a given time. When our trust in God is conditional, it will disappear when that condition is not met. And when trust is removed from any relationship, we naturally hesitate to connect. We become scared, distant, and fearful of getting hurt. When I said this to my student, he said, "*But I trusted Him, and did everything right.*" To that I said, perhaps you weren't trusting in God, you were trusting in yourself more than God: what you thought was good for you, but also *when* you thought that good should happen. In that moment, he realized not only how powerful his core belief was contributing to his distance from God, but was able to realize that the core belief itself was false, for his trust wasn't in God at all, but in himself, and in his mind's rigid and limited perception of what is good for him.

Through applying the H.O.M.E. Method, my student realized that any time we lead from our mind or *nafs*, we will set rigid rules or final conclusions that might not be truthful or serve us and our path to God. That is what core beliefs are, the final conclusion or interpretation we make as a result of an experience. But when we lead from our heart, and prioritize the sacred core beliefs of the *ruh*, we don't let the final conclusions of the mind become our authority. The mind is the servant of the heart, so we have to send these mental conclusions for elevated and truthful processing within the heart. Remember, as you previously learned, the heart has the power of *tadabbur*, to arrive at conclusions, meanings, and deeper reflections from the information the mind sends it. But unfortunately, core beliefs within Western psychology are often solely associated with a mental experience. They are viewed as the final conclusion that the mind formulates about experiences and what we go through in the world. However, the H.O.M.E Method, looking at core beliefs through an Islamic psychological lens, views core beliefs as a holistic experience that involves the mind, heart, *nafs*, and their interaction with one another.

Each of the entities within our psycho-spiritual system (the mind, *nafs*, and heart) have the capacity to formulate their own final conclusions about what we witness in the world. And I believe we will always accept or follow the belief of the entity that is the lead within us. If the *nafs* is the lead (meaning that is the part of us that we are nourishing the most), the heart will face it and begin reflecting not only its core beliefs but also core values, the beliefs and values that are driven by the *nafs*'s desires. The *nafs* (or ego), with its very limited

perception, can formulate a conclusion from its experiences. And it can firmly hold onto that conclusion throughout life if we don't engage in *tazkiyah* and the psycho-spiritual work of removing its harmful conclusions that have been serving its comfort, image, and ego-containing self. For example, a core belief rooted in our *nafs* can be that "*appearing like I don't know something makes me look weak.*" Because of this core belief driven by our lower self's desire to maintain a perfect image or live by the core value of "superiority," we will always exhaust ourselves to maintain the outer image of appearing "knowledgeable," or superior, all to maintain the image and security of the *nafs*. This might even keep us from humbling ourselves in front of God and lead us to being arrogant and condescending with people. Now, while this core belief of *needing to always know everything* and this harmful core value of *superiority*, are most likely rooted in ego-wounding, past experiences – or harmful messages a person may have received as a child where they were praised excessively for the wrong things, or they were deeply shamed by a parent when they made a mistake or didn't know something – it speaks to the great necessary work of healing and learning to lead from the heart and not the *nafs*.

On the other hand, if the mind is the lead, we will make conclusions based solely on the information we have collected in our mind. So, for example, if you have been making *dua* for something for years, and you lead from your mind, you might conclude, "*this dua will never be answered,*" because you are basing it on previous evidence you have stored in your mind, which is that you prayed this many times and your prayer is still not answered. This may be an understandable or even rational conclusion but not necessarily a truthful one, which is something we need to understand about the mind. Just because the mind creates a rational or reasonable thought does not mean it is a truthful thought. The mind has the capacity to also formulate its final (rational and at times irrational) conclusions about what we experience throughout our lives, and if it is the lead, it will never send those conclusions to the heart for elevated, truthful, and deeper processing. But when we lead from the heart, and prioritize its alignment with the *ruh*, it has the greatest capacity to formulate the best and most truthful conclusions. And it will have the power to guide the mind and *nafs* to more elevated, truthful and high quality conclusions.

Let's take the example I gave earlier of the person who has the core belief of "*I am always a failure.*" When they get rejected from a job they wanted, and their mind engages in the automatic thought of "*They are right to reject me. I never succeed anyway,*" they have a choice at that moment, to let that be the final conclusion, or to utilize the heart to guide the mind. A heart that is the lead and that is connected to God, begins to put this mind in its place. So how do we get the heart to lead in these moments when our mind or *nafs* brings us

harmful conclusions? We can lead from the heart in those moments by picking up the Qur'an and turning the heart to God's words. We can go to the verses of hope in the Qur'an that can override our thoughts of hopelessness, such as:

> "*And whoever relies upon Allah (God) – then He is sufficient for him. Indeed, Allah (God) will accomplish His purpose. Allah (God) has already set for everything a (decreed) extent.*" (65:3)
> "*So do not weaken and do not grieve, and you will be superior if you are (true) believers.*" (3:139)
> "*Allah (God) does not intend to make difficulty for you, but He intends to purify you and complete His favor upon that you may be grateful.*" (5:6)

We can also lead from the heart by humbling this mind in *sujood*, reminding it that it doesn't have the final say on what success we deserve in life. We remember that the success we receive in life is in God's power alone. We can lead from the heart by directing our unhelpful mental or *nafsi* conclusions to the *zikr* that speaks to those thoughts. If we find ourselves saying harsh things to ourselves, then we begin repeating the names of God, "*Ar-Rahman, Ar-Raheem*" (the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful), and we will find ourselves encompassed with the warmth of God's mercy and compassion, which *"encompasses all things,"* (Qur'an, 7:156). In those moments, we didn't let our mind be our god or its conclusions be our highest value. We let God, His Truths, His attributes nourish the heart, and as a result the heart begins to see what the *nafs* and mind could not. Its insight (*baseerah*) becomes sharper than the sight of our mind and lower self. It begins to see what the higher self sees, God's light. As a result, the heart forms greater and more truthful, freeing, and beautiful conclusions that override the harmful core beliefs and values that the *nafs* or mind brought it. The heart replaces them with what God would be pleased with, because after all, we are God's creation, and He wouldn't want us to call ourselves a "failure," or talk to ourselves in any way He wouldn't want us to talk to others. We are His creation, *too*.

As the heart remembers God, and begins to reflect the core beliefs and values of the *ruh*, it overrides the initial automatic thought of the mind with final conclusions such as, "*This is not a rejection, but rather a redirection from God to something better*," "*If this job was good for me, God would have allowed it*," "*It is God who controls the hearts of those interviewing me*," "*I am not a failure in front of God. He knows my efforts and how hard I worked, and my success in life is not determined by me getting this job or not.*" When we lead from the heart, we have greater power to replace all the unhelpful thoughts, conclusions, and values that the mind or *nafs* bring it.

But we have to continuously do the work of being present with what is driving our actions, behaviors, and chronic emotional reactions, and identifying

and evaluating the underlying core beliefs and core values. When we find ourselves behaving in an unhelpful or toxic way, repeatedly being triggered the same way, habitually having the same unhealthy immediate thoughts and reactions to certain events happening in our life, or find ourselves in the same destructive cycles and attachments, we have to ask ourselves, "*What is the core belief that is motivating me to act the same way every time?*" "*What is the core belief guiding me to react in this way whenever someone says this or that?*" For example, if every time you see the blessings of others, you get a negative emotional reaction which then motivates you to say something condescending or minimize the blessings of others, you might be living with a core belief of scarcity, where you believe, "*there is not enough success, blessings, or resources for everyone.*" The opposite of this core belief, is the core belief of abundance, which I define through an Islamic lens as, "*God has an infinite supply of what I see Him giving others.*" Muslims who react beautifully to the blessings of others, where they see God as the Source of all gifts they see in their life and the lives of others, usually have the core belief of abundance. We can learn a lot about our core beliefs simply by looking at our emotional reactions and what we do in response to those emotions. Doing so leads us to our core beliefs and allows us to identify them, and then do the work of changing them and elevating them. Remember, core beliefs are learned and can be unlearned. And the same is true with core values.

A key way to discover our core values is to see how we choose to live each day. The way we live each day will tell us what we deem most important in our lives. It is our actions, not our claims, that show us the truth of what we value. But also, when we find ourselves feeling disconnected from ourselves and engaging in things that do not nourish the heart, purify it, or serve our holistic growth, we have to ask ourselves, what core values am I living by? What core value was driving this choice or action? Many people do not receive nourishment from their actions and habits, because they are not in line with their core values, or those core values are values of their lower self, not their higher self. For example, a person might say, "E*very time I hang out with a certain group of friends, I come back home feeling empty.*" I might ask them, "*What kind of things do you usually do when you are with those friends?*" and they might start listing all the things they do with their friends. I then ask them, "*Do these actions align with your core values?*" And this is where many people often get stuck, because they never assessed what their core values are. But even if they have, they might not realize which of those values are rooted in their lower self and which actually align with their higher self. For example, a person might say, "*It's fun to gossip when I'm with friends,*" and having fun is a value of theirs in friendship, but this particular *way* of having fun (gossiping),

is driven by their lower self, not their higher self. So, we always have to assess what we *truly* value in life, and then we have to differentiate between lower-self values and higher-self values. When we do that, we can make the choice to start replacing our lower-self values with higher-self values. For example, a person who realizes their value of having fun through gossiping is driven by their lower self can work to stop engaging in that while increasing in conversation that is not at the expense of others, that is nourishing, God-centered, and in service of their heart's alignment with their higher self. By doing so, they are engaging in what you learned is the removal process and beautification process of *tazkiyah*. And as a result of engaging in values that are driven by the *ruh*, the heart is purified and strengthened to lead.

Here is a summary of some examples of harmful core values (lower-self values) and beneficial and elevating core values (higher-self values) identified within the H.O.M.E Method:

The H.O.M.E Method (*Table 1*): Lower-Self Values vs. Higher-Self Values

Lower-Self (*Nafs*-Driven) Values	Higher-Self (*Ruh*-Driven) Values
Perfectionism: Believing you always have to be perfect, mistake-free, be void of flaws, and without failures or setbacks in life. This leads to greater toxic shame, hopelessness, anxiety, distress, and inauthenticity.	**Work in Progress**: Believing that only God is perfect and you will always be *a work in progress* on your journey in this world. Believing that perfectionism is an illusion, and not a truth or reality, and that being sincere in front of God (with one's intentions and efforts) is most important. Believing that no good effort (even if not perfect) is lost in front of God. This leads to greater peace, alignment, more consistency (*istiqamah*), hopefulness, and inner freedom. "*As for those who believe and do good deeds We do not let the reward of anyone who does a good deed go to waste.*" (Qur'an, 18:30)

Lower-Self (*Nafs*-Driven) Values	Higher-Self (*Ruh*-Driven) Values
Superiority: Believing you are better than others, or what you have or possess (inwardly and outwardly) makes you better than others. This leads to greater anxiety, arrogance, being condescending with others, narcissistic tendencies, and hurting those you deem less than or inferior to you.	**Humility:** Believing that you are never better than others, regardless of what you have, possess, or achieved (spiritually, emotionally, or personally), that it is by God's help that you excel or possess anything, and that there is always room for growth in front of God. This leads to greater inner peace and freedom, more heart-centered (and less ego-centered) interactions with others. "*...Allah (God) seals the heart of every arrogant oppressor.*" (Qur'an, 40:35)
Always *Feeling* Good: Believing that "feeling good" consistently in life is a great value and that there is no room in one's life for feeling discomfort or agitation. This leads to stagnation in growth, obstacles to healing, excessive dopamine in the body, and greater anxiety and distress in life.	**Prioritizing *Doing* What Is Good:** Believing that "feel-good" emotions are not the priority or your highest value, and that showing up to do the actions that serve you holistically (regardless of how you feel) is what is of greater value in life, for we are judged by God not by how we feel, but by what we do. This leads to greater emotional stability, consistency (*istiqamah*), and success (in this world and the next). "*Is he who is upon a proof from his Lord like those whose evil deeds are made to appear good to them and they follow their whims?*" (Qur'an, 47:14)

Lower-Self (*Nafs*-Driven) Values	Higher-Self (*Ruh*-Driven) Values
Self-Victimization or Victimhood: Believing that others or external circumstances are always to blame for your actions and struggles, while taking no personal responsibility for the role you play in your reactions, choices, and behaviors. This leads to arrogance, narcissistic behavior, anxiety, poor relationships, and failure to grow and thrive.	**Personal Responsibility & Self-Accountability (*Muhasaba*):** Believing that your holistic health and growth requires you to take inventory and accountability for the role you play in your reactions, choices, and behaviors, and that God will hold you to account for what is within your capacity and responsibility. "*...Each soul is responsible for its own actions; no soul will bear the burden of another. You will all return to your Lord in the end, and He will tell you the truth about your differences.*" (Qur'an, 6:164)
Dishonesty: Believing that it is okay to lie to oneself, others, or to God to satisfy the comfort and desires of the *nafs*. This leads to spiritual, psychological, and personal distress and stagnation.	**Truthfulness & Sacred Authenticity (*Sidq*):** Believing that without truth, we have nothing but illusion and falsehood, and nothing (on a spiritual, psychological, or physical level) can grow, flourish, or be beautified in the absence of truth. "*Say, 'My Lord, make me go in truthfully, and come out truthfully, and grant me supporting authority from You.*" (Qur'an, 17:80)

Seek Psychological Healing To Transform Your Core Beliefs & Values

Finally, I want to reiterate and emphasize that transforming our core beliefs and values requires psychological work, not just spiritual work, especially if the harmful core beliefs and values are rooted in trauma (which they often are), especially childhood trauma. When harmful core beliefs and core values are rooted in childhood trauma or a history of chronic abuse (such as narcissistic abuse), it can be very difficult to identify or face one's core beliefs and core values, due to the painful emotions and wounds associated with them. Also, for many people who struggled with chronic abuse for several years, it can be harder to redirect their thoughts in moments of distress, and often struggle with emotional dysregulation and difficulty soothing oneself. So, it is important to seek the right outlets that can help you process your harmful core beliefs and values in a safe space, such as therapy. Therapy is a great outlet and safe space, where you can work with someone qualified and trained to help you process your core beliefs, automatic thoughts, and the triggered and unhealthy emotional reactions you may find yourself engaging in over and over again. Remember, the spiritual work you do helps your psychological experience, and the psychological work you do helps your spiritual experience.

> *"A strong believer is better and is more lovable to God than a weak believer, and there is good in everyone, (but) cherish that which gives you benefit (in the Hereafter) and seek help from God and do not lose heart...."*[237]
> — Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ)

Key Practice Tip

Take some time to reflect on Table 1 in this chapter on Lower-Self Values vs. Higher-Self Values. Using a pen and paper, write down the lower-self values you identify with and that are driving some of your current unhealthy behaviors that do not serve the leadership of your heart and holistic well-being. Be sure to leave some space under each one. After you have written them down, reflect and write down how those values play a role in those behaviors. What are the thoughts and emotions you end up feeling due to those lower-self values, and as a result, end up driving those unhealthy behaviors? After you have completed this, then take some time to direct your heart to God and ask Him for His help: to help guide you to no longer be driven by those values, but to also increase you in the higher-self values (from Table 1) that you want to replace your current lower-self values with.

237 *Sahīh Muslim*, 2664.

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Living By H.O.M.E.
Living Wholeheartedly

We end our journey in this book with an emphasis on wholeness and the importance of living wholeheartedly, which requires that you commit yourself to embodying and practicing all that you learned throughout this book, but also to living wholeheartedly. A key concept and teaching of the H.O.M.E. Method is ***Wholehearted Living***, which I define as *cultivating wholeness and heartfulness through approaching and interacting with all the relationships and areas of our lives – our relationship with ourselves, others, God, and our experiences – from a place in which we seek to feel worthy, enough, whole, and authentic through our relationship with our Creator.*

Living Wholeheartedly is essential for us to lead from the heart, and experience beauty, meaning, and a connection to what we go through in our lives. When we live with our **whole** heart and approach our lives with our whole heart, we will receive nourishment from all that God has put in front of us. But when we live half-heartedly, when we do not value the presence and engagement of our whole heart, when we reject parts of ourselves, when we live in compartments and do not see the connection between all the areas in our lives, or when we are trying to serve both our *nafs* and heart through the same action, what we are doing is depriving our hearts from connecting to all that we go through and deriving meaning and nourishment from them as well.

Today, many people are not engaging their whole heart with their experiences, because their *nafs* is too powerful of a force within them. The heart's nourishment is often not a priority. As a result, we deprive ourselves from enjoying the beauty that this journey has to offer. And this path we are walking in this world, *does* have great beauty to offer us. Think about this: *Would God put us on this earth if He did not have something to offer us?* Many of us are living our lives on cruise control as if this world is a punishment, as if it's our prison sentence. But what does that say about God, if we believe this? God is merciful, loving, and wants goodness for us. If we believe that, then we have to ask ourselves: *Would God just create us and put us in a prison to just do the time?* If that is the case, why then did He beautify the earth for us, give us sight and hearing, decorate our world, surround us with breathtaking nature, give us provisions, and fashion us in the best of forms?[238] Why would He tell

238 Qur'an, (95:4)

us about Himself and what He has to give us in this world and the next.

This world is not a punishment. It is an opportunity. It is a means to experience the most beautiful thing we can attain: a fulfilling relationship with our Creator. He put us in this world to experience Him, to know Him, to love Him, to utilize all that He gave us, so that we can be who He designed us to be and return to Him in the best of ways. And this is a truth we learn from the story of Adam. Many people think that us being in this world is a punishment because Adam was sent to this world as a punishment. I did too, until my teacher taught me to view the story of Adam in a different light. He taught me that if Adam stayed in the heavens, he would only know God as the Creator and Giver of all the perfection he witnessed in heaven. But only when Adam made a mistake, and was sent to this lower world, did he have the opportunity to experience the sweetness of knowing God as the Forgiver (*Al-Ghafar*) and the Most Compassionate and Merciful (*Ar-Rahman Ar-Raheem*). Had Adam not made a mistake, he would not have developed that intimate connection with God that comes from turning to Him after making a mistake and finding himself enveloped in His great love and mercy.

When we awake to the truth that all our experiences in this world are a means to knowing God, we get to experience an awakened, fulfilling and nourishing relationship with God. But when we live in a way that is not wholehearted, that is half-hearted, where we do not value engaging our whole heart, we will go through this life as if we are asleep, missing out on significant opportunities to know God and benefit from who He is to us on our path. As a result, we will find ourselves just passing the time until we get to our final destination. Remember this, if your heart is asleep on the journey, you will be abruptly awakened when you meet your final destination. So let us live wholeheartedly so that our final destination is not the only time when we wake up, because then it will be too late.

Engaging our Whole Heart: Cultivating Heartfulness

The best experience is the experience of the heart becoming *full*, and that is when the heart walks away from its experiences more nourished than any other part within us. That is the product of engaging our whole hearts and living wholeheartedly.

To engage our whole hearts, we set it up to receive what it needs. And to do that, we have to engage it fully, by first being attuned to what it needs to align with our higher self. We have to be sensitive to the role of our heart in the moments we experience. Is it engaged? Is it present? Is it connecting? What is it seeking? We as spiritual beings are wired for connection. But we need our heart *to* connect. Without our heart as a priority and lead, we would not be

able to connect to our experiences, others, or God. This need for connection is there to guide us to our Creator, but to also derive the nourishment we need from all that He put in front of us. When we do not value engaging our whole heart, we miss out on the full potential of nourishment that we can receive from our experiences and interactions with God, ourselves, and others. Living with our whole heart means that we see the value of being fully present, engaged, and connected to what we say, what we do, the choices we make, the interactions we have, and the experiences we go through. Islam empowers wholehearted living through the practices you have already learned throughout this book: the practices of gratitude, intention-setting, and presence with God, ourselves, and others. These practices call for the heart to be fully connected and engaged. When we do not see the value of these practices, we will live with less than our whole hearts and we will not witness the beauty and nourishment that our heart is capable of experiencing. As a result, the heart cannot beautifully lead our being.

Train Your Heart to Seek Its Wholeness Through Your Creator

We all long to be sufficed. We all long to feel enough, whole, and fully nourished. We all long to feel worthy. We long for our hearts to be full. This is what wholehearted living is centered around, creating more moments in which our hearts walk away whole and full rather than malnourished and in pieces. Living wholeheartedly means that we understand that God is the Only and Greatest Source of our wholeness. For us to feel complete, whole, sufficed, enough, and worthy we need God and will always be in need of Him. And through trial and error, God shows us throughout our life that nothing else can complete the heart or fulfill it except Him. To live wholeheartedly, we need to approach life in a way where our worth and value is sought through the One who made us. When we are not deeply connected to this, we will approach our lives from a place of inferiority and unworthiness, feeling like we are less than and not whole unless we get x, y, and z. We will tie our wholeness to things that do not last and are temporary.

In the Qur'an, God tells us that nothing will benefit a soul on the day of judgment except one who brings back to God "*qalbin saleem,*" a sound or whole heart.[239] Knowing this, we have to ask ourselves: *Would God ask us to*

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239 "*The Day when there will not benefit (anyone) wealth or children*" (Qur'an, 26:88); ""*But only he (will prosper) that brings to Allah (God) a sound heart*" (Qur'an, 26:89, Yusuf Ali Translation); "*Save him who bringeth unto Allah (God) a whole heart*" (Qur'an, 26:89, Pickthall Translation).

bring back to him a whole heart, and depend our wholeness on anything that is temporary? Of course not. Through this verse, I learned that my wholeness, my sense of completion, my ability to feel worthy and sufficed, is through the One who is Ever-Living. This verse conveys to us that our possessions, our wealth, our loved ones, our families, and anything that we sought out for wholeness in this world, cannot be of benefit to our souls on the day when we stand before our Creator. Only a heart that sought out its wholeness through its Creator in this world can be whole in front of God in the next world. And so, if God is telling us that our wealth and children cannot contribute to a "sound" or "whole" heart on the day of judgment, then He is also telling us that our wholeness in this world cannot come from those things either. Only a heart that experienced wholeness through its Creator in this world can return back to Him in a state of wholeness.

Seeking wholeness from God does not mean we do not benefit from others or things that God puts in our lives. We have the potential to benefit from everything that God puts in front of us, whether that is people, experiences, or possessions. People can bring great joy, love, and nourishment into our lives. The key point to consider, though, is that we can benefit from all that God puts in front of us and enjoy what they have to offer, but they do not have the power that God has to fully complete us. For example, spouses can complement each other's personalities, and bring to the relationship what the other does not have, and bring out the better parts in one another, but they do not have the power to fully complete another. Every human being is imperfect and does not have the capacity to complete all that is missing in our lives. No *one* person can fulfill all our needs. Even a spouse cannot be *everything* to their spouse, and going into a marriage with that expectation creates many problems. Even Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) teaches us that marriage completes half our faith,[240] but He does not teach us that marriage or our spouses complete half of *us*. Because then, what does that say about people who are widowed, divorced, or have never got married? Do they not have the opportunity to experience wholeness? What about some of the greatest scholars such as Shaykh Ibn Taymiyah and Imam An-Nawawi (رحمهما الله), who never got married? Are they not whole? By society and people's standards, perhaps, but by God's standards, they are most definitely whole through Him. But unfortunately, many people define their wholeness through the standards of society and people.

The journey of wholeness through the H.O.M.E. Method is about seeking with God what is missing within us, and what is missing from our world and relationships. It is living with certainty that only God can have the complete

240 *Al-Mu'jam al-Awsat,* 992 (Sahīh al-Suyuti).

power to give us all of what we don't have, to complete a piece within us that is missing, or to suffice us in the most complete way that no human being can. People can be the means in which our hearts become more open towards God and towards seeking His wholeness, but they are not the *source* of our wholeness.

Remember, God wants
you to be whole
through Him,
not broken
through the people.[241]

Assess What Your Worth Is Attached To

Your ability to feel whole is very much associated with what you attach your worth to. Because worth is essentially how valuable you think you are, and many people have tied their value to everything but God. They think they are worthy only when they achieve a certain milestone, wear the right clothes, have a certain career, get married, have children, have the right house, or look a certain way. And this is why many people do not experience wholeness, for they are waiting for specific things to complete them, to tell them "*you are worthy now*," "*you are complete now*," and until they receive that thing, they feel worthless. And the experience of worthlessness only fills the heart with great emptiness and sadness. When this happens, God will sometimes withhold that very thing you *think* you need to be worthy and whole, *or* He will give it to you, for both His giving and withholding are often designed to open our hearts to see that what we were waiting for was never designed to be the source of our wholeness. And only He, Most High, knows whether His giving or His withholding is best for us in a given situation. Our Creator knows us best. Prophet Ayyub (Job, ﷺ) understood this truth very powerfully after being tested with the greatest of difficulties. He said: *"I praise You, the Lord of lords, Who bestowed His kindness upon me and gave me wealth and children, and there was no corner of my heart that was not filled with attachment to these worldly things, then You took all of that away from me and You emptied my heart, and there is nothing to stand between me and You. If my enemy Iblis (Satan) knew of this, he would be jealous of me."*[242]

But it's not just people, milestones, or material wealth, that people can attach their worth to. Many of us make the mistake of defining our worth by our tests and struggles, where we think our pain and trials in life reflect

241 Poem by the author.

242 "21.83-84 Kathir - Ibn Al Kathir" (n.d.).

our value and wholeness. But you must remember that just like people do not define your worth, your tests, trials, and varying experiences in life also do not define your worth. You always have the opportunity to feel complete and be whole through God, as you go through the varying phases of your journey in this world. Your wholeness is not dependent on what is temporary, on what you go through, or what you have or what is missing from your life. It is dependent on seeing your worth and value through the only One who is complete and is the Source of everything you need, and that is God. Root yourself in this belief. Say it to yourself daily. And never let people or society convince you otherwise.

Just like the moon,
you *too*
can go through phases
and still be whole.[243]

So, I encourage you to take the time to assess where you have placed your worth and what you have attached your wholeness to. Ask yourself questions like, "*What condition have I placed for me to feel worthy and whole?*" "*What have I falsely and rigidly defined as the source of my wholeness and worth?*" When you identify what it is you have tied your worth and wholeness to, you then need to ask yourself this: "*What am I seeking from that thing that I can get from God?*" Are you seeking attention, importance, love, sufficiency, status, proof that you are "good enough"? Well, you can get all of that from God, and when He is the One through which you seek to feel enough and to be seen, known, heard, loved, and valued, He will nourish you and elevate you in ways nothing or noone else can.

Cultivate a Heart that Feels Enough & Sufficed Through God

Living wholeheartedly and heartfully is also very much associated with the sufficiency of the heart. It requires that we train our hearts to feel enough and sufficed through God. Our experiences in life will always change. Our tests will vary and our inevitable challenges through our human experience will bring us different pains. But what I realized from my own journey and my work with others over the years is that the struggles we face may change, but there is a question we have to ask ourselves that always stays the same. The question is, "*Is God enough for our heart?*" or "*Can we be sufficed with God, even through this struggle?*" In every struggle and test, regardless of what door is shut in front of

243 Poem by the author.

us, the door of feeling enough and being sufficed through God is always open to us. The heart always has access to the door of sufficiency, wholeness, and fullness with God. Through being content with His decree, through gratitude and presence with God, and through keeping the eye of our heart on what He is giving us through the test, the heart becomes linked to what it needs to lead and thrive, regardless of varying external circumstances.

When we lead from the heart, we recognize the great power God gives it to access Him through all our experiences. In any moment, we each have the opportunity to gain from God what we don't get from that which is outside of us: from our parents, from our relationships, from our experiences, and from the world. Living wholeheartedly means that we recognize the potential and the ability of our hearts to feel sufficed, enough, and nourished despite external factors, especially ones we can't control. Ramadan reminds us of this truth very powerfully. In Ramadan we are deeply connected to the fact that God suffices us in ways nothing else can. He is enough for all of our hearts. And Ramadan is the month where our hearts remember the sweetness of that truth.

Our heart is the greatest gift and tool within us. It has the ability to experience beauty even if the mind cannot measure that beauty or rationalize it. The eye of our heart can see meaning in our experiences even if our physical eye only sees struggles or problems. The heart has the potential to feel enough even if the *nafs* or ego does not feel like it *has* enough. The heart has the ability to feel enough and sufficed even if our external circumstances are challenging and even if we do not receive approval and validation from the world and people around us. *How liberating is that?* To have the ability to feel sufficed internally regardless of what is happening outside of us? God gave us this ability to be free internally by detaching from anything other than Him and by depending only on Him for our wholeness.

Through His names, we can access an infinite supply of what we feel is missing from within. If we do not feel loved, we can suffice our hearts by accessing the Most Loving, *Al-Wadud*, who not only will shower us with love, but has the power to place people in our lives who love us beautifully and more sacredly. If we do not feel enough and we always feel less than, we can suffice our hearts by accessing *Al-Mughni*, the One who enriches us, suffices us with what we need, and gives abundantly. When we feel a lack of compassion in the world, whether that is from others or from our own selves, we have the opportunity to access *Ar-Rahman, Ar-Raheem*, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful. Wholehearted living is engaging our heart to seek all the ways that God can suffice it through the varying experiences we go through in this world.

Ibn Al-Qayyim said, "*In the heart are disorders that cannot be remedied except by responding to Allah (God). In it is a desolate feeling that cannot be removed except by intimacy with Him solitude. In it is sadness which will not leave except by happiness with knowing Him and truthfulness in his dealings. In it is anxiety that is not made tranquil except by gathering for His sake and fleeing to Him from His punishment. In it is a fire of regret which cannot be extinguished except by satisfaction with His commands, prohibitions, and decrees, and embracing patience with that until the time he meets Him. In it is a strong desire that will not cease until He is the only one who is sought. In it is a void that cannot be filled except by His love, turning to Him, always remembering Him, and being sincere to Him. Were a person to be given the entire world and everything in it, that would never fill the void.*"[244]

On the days you wake up feeling like you are not sufficed with your life as it is – like you need something more in your life to make you feel complete and whole – or on the days when your heart just does not feel any peace, I encourage you to practice this. Put your hand over your heart and repeat "*God is Enough for Me, God is Enough for me.*" This phrase can be found more than once in the Qur'an[245] and is often associated with putting our trust in God and being sufficed with Him as our Lord, and with His Power and ability to take care of us and our affairs.

We are always seeking to feel sufficed, to feel enough, whole and nourished. That is what the heart seeks. It is programmed in such a way so that we navigate our way to the only One who can truly satisfy it, suffice it, and nourish it. This statement, "God is enough for me," reminds our heart of what it truly needs and where its complete nourishment lies. So, on the days you feel like you and what you have is not enough to bring you joy, peace, and fulfillment, I encourage you to place your hand on your heart and repeat this phrase. "*God is enough and sufficient for me.*" And as you keep your hand over your heart and continue to repeat this phrase, reflect on God, His power, His perfection, and His ability to nourish you in ways nothing and no one else can. Keep reflecting and repeating this phrase until your heart feels the beauty of what you are saying, until your heart begins to feel sufficed by its Creator.

And remember this: when we stop waiting for things to make our hearts fulfilled and instead turn to God for our nourishment and depend on Him for our heart's fulfillment, He has a way of taking care of everything else in our life. When He becomes our priority, He takes care of everything else we detached from to depend on Him alone. As Prophet Muhammad ﷺ taught

244 *Madārij al-Sālikīn*, 3/156.

245 Qur'an, 3:173, 9:129

us: "*Whoever says in the morning and in the evening 'God is sufficient for me, there is no god besides Him; in Him have I put my trust and He is the Lord of the mighty Throne,' seven times, Allah (God), may He be exalted, will suffice him for what concerns him of the affairs of this world and the Hereafter.*"[246]

Final Practice Tip & Reminder

As you learned in this book, revisiting knowledge and working hard to continuously apply knowledge you learned helps your mind be a great servant to your heart. So don't let this be the last time you connect with this book and what you learned. Perhaps, everytime you read it, you will gain new lessons that apply to every phase of life you are in. This book is filled with practices that can help you experience greater spiritual and emotional well-being. But it's important that you keep coming back and choosing a piece of knowledge that you will intentionally apply into your life. Do not just be satisfied with knowing. Keep coming back until you have applied all the practices in this book. And if you want to continue the sacred journey you started in this book and take your psycho-spiritual transformation to the next level, then be sure to bring your heart to The H.O.M.E. Institute, where students are actively doing the sacred work of living by the H.O.M.E. Method and transforming their relationship with God and with themselves, **through both theory and practice**!

246 *Hisn al-Muslim*, 83, referencing Qur'an, 9:129.

About The Author

Dr. Marwa Assar is a Doctor of Psychology (PsyD) and psycho-spiritual teacher who specializes in providing therapy and counseling as well as psycho-spiritual wellness education that are rooted in Islamic teachings and approached through an Islamic Psychological Lens. Alongside her studies of Islam and continuous pursuit of Islamic knowledge, Dr. Marwa has studied psychology extensively for 10 years. She has received a Bachelor's Degree (B.A.) in Psychology from Montclair State University in New Jersey, a Master of Education (M.Ed) in Counseling Psychology from Rutgers University in New Jersey, and a Doctoral degree (Psy.D) in Applied Clinical Psychology from the Chicago School of Professional Psychology in California.

Dr. Marwa spent over 15 years extensively exploring Islamic psychology and completed her doctoral research study in 2017 on "An Islamic Psychological Approach to Psychotherapy," which highlighted what Islamic teachings have to offer to the world of psychological wellness and psycho-therapy with Muslim clients. In addition to her studies, Dr. Marwa's 10+ years of clinical training and experience involved working with diverse populations in various settings from an inpatient substance abuse treatment facility, to schools, private practice, and non-profit mental health organizations.

Dr. Marwa is also the founder of The H.O.M.E Institute, which is named after the Heart Over Mind & Ego (H.O.M.E.) Method to psycho-spiritual wellness (the method taught in this book), a methodology she conceptualized through an Islamic psychological lens in 2014, to help others understand their psychological and spiritual design and experience greater inner peace and alignment. Through her work at The H.O.M.E. Institute, Dr. Marwa offers both online and in-person learning spaces for the hearts of others where students can gain the heart-centered knowledge and tools that will empower their spiritual, emotional, and holistic well-being.

Today, in addition to her work at The H.O.M.E. Institute, she serves as a part-time psychologist at the Islamic Center of NYU (ICNYU) and a part-time adjunct professor for Boston Islamic Seminary (BIS) where she teaches a course on Islam and Psychology. She also has extensive experience providing empowering and educational talks across the U.S on Islamic spirituality, psychology, and psycho-spiritual well-being.

Appendix A: Important Islamic Terms

akhira	The hereafter
al-ghayb	The unseen
alhamdulilah	Praise be to God
Allah	Qur'anic & Arabic Name for God
Allahu Akbar	God is greater
athan	Call to prayer
ayah	Verse of the Qur'an
barakah	Blessings
baseerah	Insight
dua	A form of *zikr*: prayer in the form of supplication or calling upon God
dunya	The world
fard	Mandate
Fiqh	Islamic Jurisprudence
fitrah	Innate truth or nature
hadith	Sayings of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ)
hajj	Yearly holy pilgrimage to Makkah that each Muslim should perform once in life
halal	Good, ethical
haram	Prohibited
hijrah	Migration, often refers to the migration of the Prophet (ﷺ) from Makkah to Madinah
huzn	Sadness. The period when the Prophet (ﷺ) endured great hardship is called the year of *huzn*
luya'	Something that is high, lofty
ibadah	The comprehensive experience of love and connection with God: to know, love, and submit to Him
ihsan	Worshiping God knowing He is watchful over us
ikhlaas	Sincerity
ilm	Knowledge
iman	Faith
inna lilahi wa inna ilayhi rajee'oon	Verily, to God we belong, and to Him we return.
inshaAllah	God willing

Islam	An Abrahamic monotheistic faith that is based on the belief that God is one, and that Muhammad (ﷺ) is God's final prophet and messenger. Literally "surrendering" or "submitting."
Isra' Al ma'raj	The Prophet's (ﷺ) ascension to the heavens
istighfar	Ask forgiveness
istiqamah	Steadfastness
ithaar	Selflessness
izza	Honor
Jalla Jalaluhu	An honorific for God meaning, "His Glory is so High" (*Jalla Jalaluhu*, ﷻ)
jannah	Heaven
jinn	Unseen beings
Kaaba	God's sacred house in Makkah
muhasaba	Personal responsibility and accountability
mu'azzin	Caller to prayer
muraqabah	A meditative and reflective practice (within Sufism)
Muslim	Those who believe the tenets of Islam and have recited the testimonial of faith (*shahada*), submitting to God
nafs	Self or ego
nafs al mutma'inah	Tranquil self
nafs al lawamma	Self-critical self
niyyah	Intentions
Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ)	God's final prophet and messenger to humanity, who was sent to confirm the same monotheistic teachings brought earlier by Adam, Ibrahim, Musa, Issa and other prophets(ﷺ).
qalbin saleem	Sound or whole heart
Qur'an	Islamic Holy Book
rabb	Lord
rakat	Cycles, often referring to prayer
rida	Contentment with God
ruqyah	Healing method rooted in the Qur'an and sunnah
sadaqah	Charity
salah	Formal prayer of Muslims

salam	Peace
sayyidul istighfar	A supplication for seeking refuge in God from the harm that our actions could cause us
seerah	The life story of the Prophet (ﷺ)
shahada	The Islamic testimonial of faith: *La Illah Ila Allah wa Mohammad Rasul Allah* (I bear witness that there is no god worthy of worship except God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God)
shahideen	Witnesses (of God's truth)
Shaytan	Satan
shirk	Associating partners with God
shukr	Gratitude
sidq	Truthfulness, authenticity
sifat	Attribute (of God)
sihr	Sorcery, magic
sillah	Connection or link, shares the same word root as "*salah*"
siratul mustaqeem	The straight path (the path of God)
subhanAllah	All glory is to God
sujood	The five daily prayers
sunnah	Tradition or way of life (of Prophet Muhammad, ﷺ)
surah	Chapter of the Qur'an
swt	An honorific for God, meaning "Glory be to Him, the Exalted" (*subhanahu wa ta'ala*)
tadabbur	Contemplation involving the spiritual, cognitive, and holistic experience of both the mind and heart
taffakur	The search of the mind for knowledge and meaning, utilizing the information that the mind
tafsir	Meaning
taqwa	God-consciousness
tarbiyah	Parenting, possessing "*rabb*-like" qualities
tasawuf	Traditional Sufism, a dimension within Islamic teachings
tawaf	The counter-clockwise circling of the *Kaaba* during *hajj* or *umrah*

tawakul	Trust in and reliance on God
tawazun	Restraint and balance
tawheed	The Oneness of God
tayyib	Good, pure
tazkiyah	Purification of the self
ummah	Community, referring to the global Muslim community
umrah	The minor holy pilgrimage to Makkah
wakeel	Trustee, disposer of affairs
yaqeen	Certainty
yaqiloon	The ability to intellectualize, reason, and utilize wisdom
zikr	Is referred to as "remembrance of God," and is an act of worship in the form of repeated phrases or prayers

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Hadith Citations

Al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar
Al-Mu'jam al-Awsat
Al-Mu'jam al-Kabīr
Al-Suyuti, al-Durr al-Manthur
Al-Zuhd wal-Raqa'iq
Hadith an-Nawawi
Hadith Qudsi
Hisn al-Muslim
Jami' at-Tirmidhi
Madārij al-Sālikīn
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